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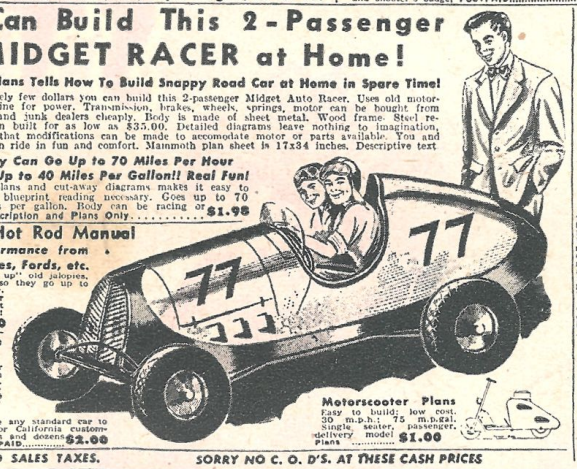

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STARTLING STORIES

Vol. 20, No. 1 A THRILLING PUBLICATION September, 1949

A Complete Novel

THE PORTAL IN THE PICTURE

By HENRY KUTTNER

Eddie Burton walks with death when he enters the gateway to an alien world — Malesco, the strange land where A stands for Alchemy and Atomic power! 9

Two Complete Novelets

THE HOTHOUSE PLANET ..... Arthur K. Barnes 84

Beautiful Gerry Carlyle was sure of her own ability to bring back alive any creature! A Hall of Fame Classic reprinted by popular demand

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Anthony Twain had to cross the sky's darkest blot—the Coal Sack!

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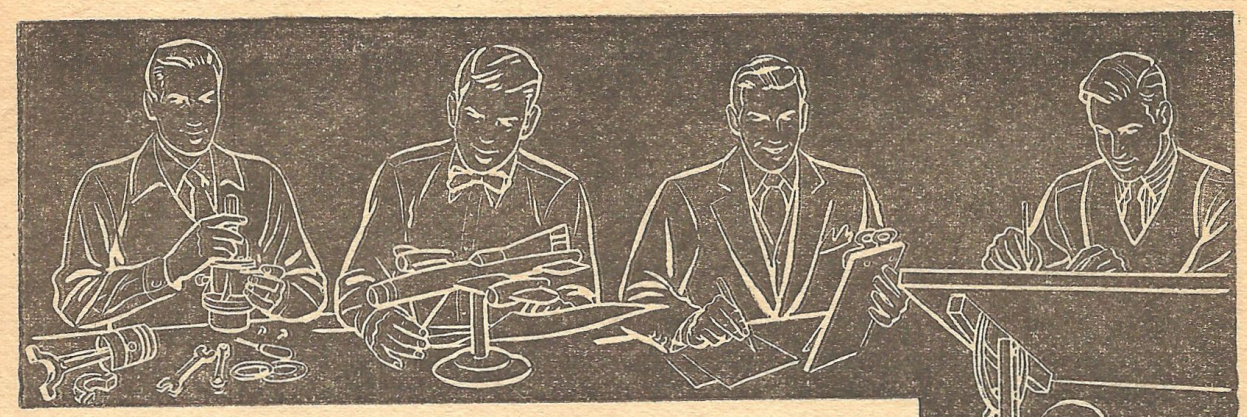

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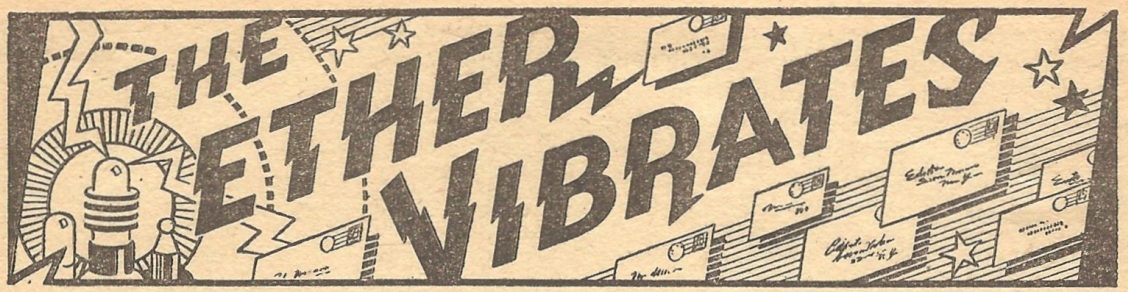

THE United States Army is currently testing what John Chabot Smith of the New York *Herald Tribune* terms "a contraption invented by John Frank Kopczynski of North Tonawanda, New York." This contraption is nothing more nor less than a practical elaboration of the elliptical wheel, until recently used only by circus clowns, vaudeville cyclists and the like.

To avoid bumpiness, the 31-year-old inventor has put his wheels in pairs on either side of his test vehicle, arranging them so that when the flat of one wheel is in contact with the ground, the round side of its adjoining neighbor is down. The hubs of each pair are connected by a rocker arm resembling a seesaw or one of the walking beams in use on old river steamers.

The purpose of the double elliptical wheels is, of course, to add to the efficiency of ordinary wheels, especially when operating in mud or deep snow. There is a good possibility that the Army may find the device of considerable use for its various types of vehicles.

No Wheel in Nature!

Such a refinement in man's best friend, the wheel, brings irresistibly to mind the wheel-musings of H. G. Wells in his celebrated novel, "The War of the Worlds." That book, in case any of you are unfamiliar with it, is the tale of invasion by Martian octopi creatures on which Orson Welles and John Houseman based their justly celebrated broadcast of eleven years ago.

Wells' invaders were, of course, developed vastly beyond man when it came to science. They covered immense distances at amazing speeds, encased in altitudinous armored turrets atop stilt-like metal legs. Nowhere, according to the author, did they employ the wheel.

Wells went on to muse upon the fact that nowhere in nature does the wheel appear —although the complexities achieved by natural growth are far more intricate than anything made by man. Consideration of the ball-and-socket articulation of the human shoulder or thigh bone, or the complex joints of most insects is sufficient proof of this fact.

The wheel has certainly been of tremendous aid to our species in the long climb from cave to penthouse, from sharpened stick to the A-bomb. But it does begin to look as if it might be on its way out. Come to think of it, many of mankind's most tremendous achievements have been accomplished without it—as, for instance, the pyramids of Egypt or of Central America.

The Caterpillar Tread

For travel over any but the best of roads the caterpillar tread has for some decades now been generally recognized as far superior to the wheel. And though such traction is but a sublimation of the wheels upon which the tread revolves, still it may be the first step in departure from the wheel.

Airplanes, upon which we are coming more and more to depend for transportation use the wheel only in take-offs and landings —and the helicopter uses it not at all. The next few years may see landing gear—wheeled landing gear, that is—vanish like the dinosaurs.

Knee-action devices are replacing wheel-and-belting techniques increasingly in industry as practical inventors and manufacturers battle without respite the waste of friction which is the inevitable result of use of the wheel. As in nature itself, the articulated joint is becoming more and more important in the machinery upon which much of our daily life depends.

There is, of course, always the possibility that man, when he invented the wheel, went nature one better. Certainly he could not have developed what passes of civilization, to say nothing of the Industrial Age, without it. His first power, water power, depended upon the wheel.

But the wheel proved a failure on ocean vessels and was generally discarded in

favor of Ericcson's far more efficient screw propeller. The "contraption" of John Frank Kopszynski suggests, in its monstrous application of the wheel, that perhaps it will some day be discarded on land.

Word Wheels

The importance of the wheel in human life and thought is evidenced clearly by its place in daily speech. "Wheels within wheels" and "put your shoulder to the wheel" and "get the wheels turning" are but three out of hundreds of proverbs and sayings that have grown up around our use of the wheel.

If the wheel is proved finally to be less efficient than other methods of converting energy to practical uses, its actuality will in time vanish from human thought and speech. Other sayings, like other devices and "contraptions," will be developed to take its place.

Perhaps, out of the atomic age or even the experiments backed by Roger Babson, some long-dreamed-of anti-gravity device will enable vehicles to skim the surfaces of our roads without actually touching them. Perhaps one-man helicoptors may do the trick. We don't profess to be a prophet.

But somehow we suspect the wheel is doomed, has been doomed since H. G. Wells voiced his first suggestion of its inefficiency fifty-one years ago in his "The War of the Worlds." If it takes a device as grotesque and elaborate as Mr. Kopczynski's to make it practical, we must suspect the worst.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

NOVEMBER, this year of grace, means Murray Leinster. The indefatigable scrivener of Beechurst, Long Island, Gloucester, Virginia, and points north, south, east and west has come up with what we feel is his best novel in some time —entitled THE OTHER WORLD.

It is a story of tangential space and a strange civilization, to say nothing of Fortean phenomena. It is a tale of terror and magic and pseudo science, of danger, escape and death. It is, in short, out of this world entirely, even while very much in and of it.

In this instance, so arresting is Mr. Leinster's story from its opening sentence that we are going to give you a foretaste of THE OTHER WORLD by offering a

(Continued on Page 143)

HAD NEVER WRITTEN A LINE SELLS ARTICLE BEFORE COMPLETING COURSE

"Before completing the N. I. A. course, I sold a feature to Screenland Magazine for $50. That resulted in an immediate assignment to do another. After successive feature stories, I am now working into the fiction field. Previous to enrolling, I had never written a line, for publication. —Gene E. Levant, 116 West Ave., Los Angeles 28, Calif.

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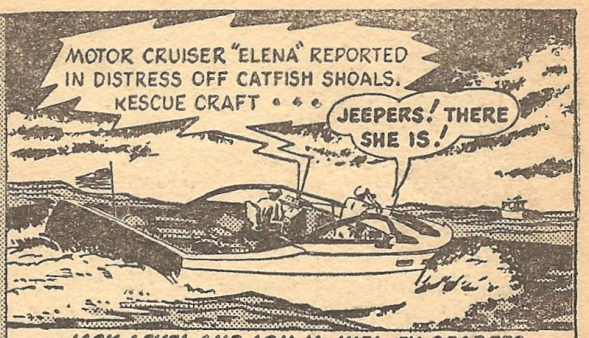
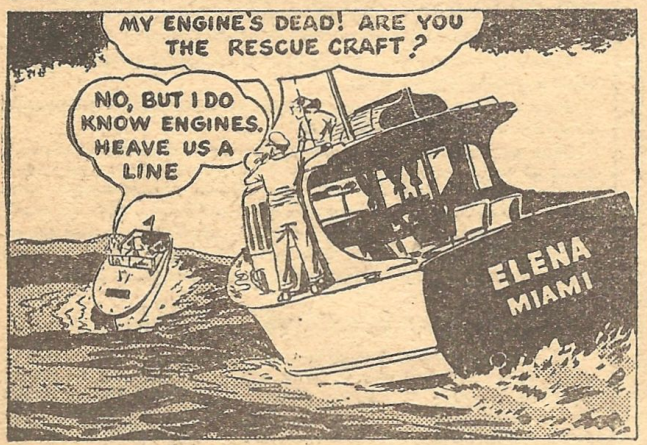
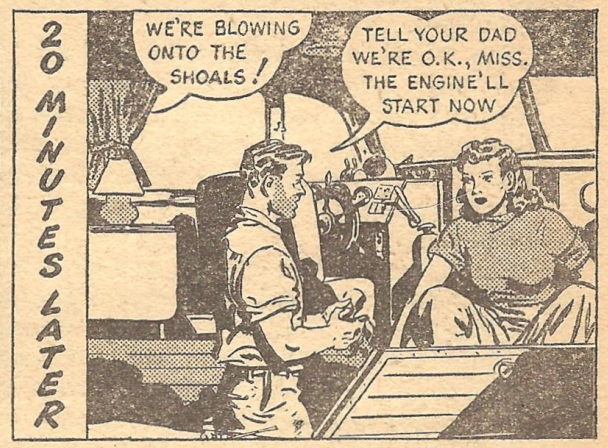
JACK PLAYED IN LUCK WHEN...



JACK LEVEL AND LOU McKIEL, EX-SEABEES, ARE ON THE SECOND DAY OF A ROUGH RUN DOWN THE COAST IN THEIR NEWLY-PURCHASED SECONDHAND BOAT, WHEN..





a novel by HENRY KUTTNER

Eddie Burton walks with death when he enters the gateway to an alien world!

the PORTAL in the PICTURE

PROLOGUE

SHE called herself Malesca. Her agent called her the "Loveliest Girl in the World" and I suppose he wasn't far wrong, at that. If I'd known she was playing the Windsor Roof that night I'd have gone somewhere else.

But by the time I was at the table, having a sandwich and a highball, it was too late. The lights dimmed, the spot went on and there stood Malesca, bowing to the storm of applause. I wasn't going to let her spoil my drink. I could always look somewhere else while she was on. I ate white meat of chicken, drank my

highball and thought about other things —until the famous velvet voice began to sing.

I listened to her sing. A chair creaked. In the dimness someone sat down beside me. I peered through the gloom, recognizing the man, a top figure in show business.

"Hello, Burton," he said.

"Hello."

"Mind if I join you?"

I waved my hand and he gave his order to the waiter who slid up noiselessly. Malesca was still singing.

The man beside me watched her, as rapt and intent as everybody else in the club except me.

Two encores later, when the lights went up, I realized that he was staring at me curiously. My disinterest in the singer must have been pretty obvious.

"No like?" he asked in a puzzled voice.

Even before Korzybski that particular question would have been meaningless. I couldn't answer him and I knew it. So I didn't bother. I just didn't say anything. I could see Malesca from the corner of my eye, hear the rustle of her stiff skirts as she came through the tables toward me. I sighed.

SHE was wearing some light flowery scent I knew she hadn't picked out for herself. She put her hand on the table edge and leaned toward me.

"Eddie," she said.

"Well?"

"Eddie, I haven't seen you for ages."

"That's right."

"Listen, why don't you wait around? Take me somewhere after my last show. We could have a drink or something. How about it, Eddie?"

Her voice was pure magic. It had been magic on radio and records and video. It would soon be magic in the movies. I didn't say a word.

"Eddie—please."

I picked up my glass, emptied it, brushed crumbs off my coat, laid the napkin beside the plate.

"Thanks," I said. "Wish I could."

She stared at me, the familiar, searching stare full of incomprehension. I could hear the applause still echoing.

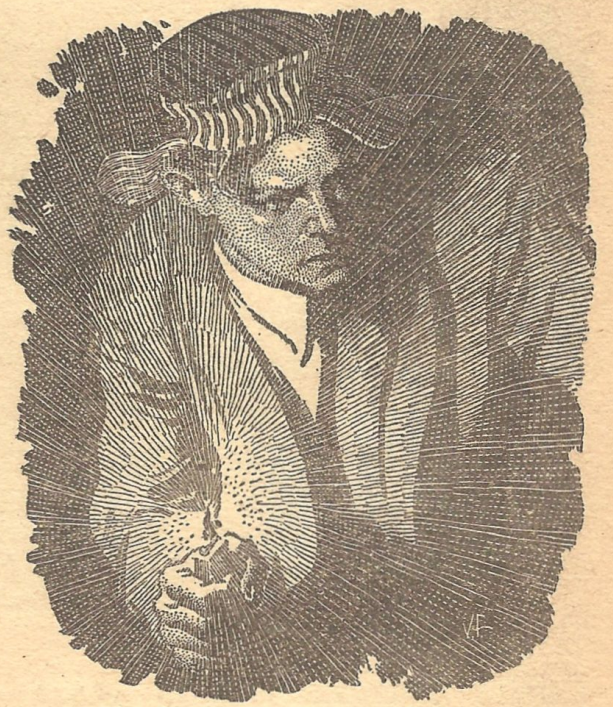
"Eddie—"

"You heard me," I said. "Take a walk. Take an encore. Go on, beat it."

Without a word she turned away and went back to the floor, her skirts frothing and hissing as she squeezed between the tables. The man beside me said: "Eddie, are you crazy?"

"Probably," I said. I wasn't going to explain to him.

"All right, Eddie. You know the answers, I suppose. But something must be



EDDIE BURTON

wrong. The most beautiful woman in the world throwing herself at your feet—and you won't even look at her. That just isn't sensible."

"I'm not a very sensible guy," I told him. It was a lie, of course. I'm the most sensible guy in the world—in any world.

"Don't give me clichés," he said "That's no answer."

"Clichés!" I said and choked in my glass. "Okay, okay, never mind. Nothing wrong with clichés, you know. They're just truths that happen so often they're trite. It doesn't make them any less true, does it?" I looked at Malesca squaring off at the mike, getting ready to sing again.

"I knew a man once who tried to discredit clichés," I went on thoughtfully, knowing I was probably saying too much. "He failed. He had quite a time, that guy."

"What happened?"

"Oh, he found a fabulous land and rescued a beautiful goddess and overthrew a wicked high priest and—forget it. Maybe it was a book I read."

"What fabulous land was that?" my friend inquired idly.

"Malesco."

He lifted an eyebrow at me and glanced across the room at the Most Beautiful Girl in the World.

"Malesco? Where's that?"

"Right behind you," I said.

Then I picked up my fresh highball and buried my nose in it. I had nothing more to say—to him. But a chord in the music just then woke a thin shivering wire of sound at the back of my brain and for an instant the barrier between this world and the worlds outside was as thin as air.

Malesco, I thought. I shut my eyes and tried to make the domes and towers of that rose-red city take shape in the darkness while the chord still sounded in my ears. But I couldn't do it. Malesco had gone back into the fable again and the gates were shut forever.

And yet, when I think about it now even the sense of wonder and disbelief is suspended and I have no feeling at all that it was in some dream I walked those streets. They were real. I've got the most convincing kind of proof that they were real.

It all happened quite awhile ago. . . .

CHAPTER I

A "Lady" Vanishes

REMEMBER the story of the blind men and the elephant? Not one of them ever found out it was an elephant. That's the way it was with me. A new world was opening right in front of me and I put it down to eyestrain.

I sat there in my apartment with a bottle and watched the air flicker.

I told myself to get up and switch off the lights because Lorna had got in the habit of dropping by if I didn't show up at the ginmill where she worked, and I didn't want to talk to her. Lorna Maxwell was a leech. She had attached herself to me with all the simple relentlessness of her one-track mind and short of killing her I knew no way to pry her loose.

It all seemed so easy to Lorna. Here I was, rising young actor Eddie Burton with a record of three straight Broadway hits and a good part in something new that all the critics liked. Fine.

Here she was, that third-rate young ginmill singer Lorna Maxwell with no record at all that she admitted to. Don't ask me how we met or how she got her hooks into me. I'm a born easy mark. Children, animals and people like Lorna can spot people like me a mile away.

She'd got it into her addled little head somehow that all I had to do was say the word and she'd be right up there beside me, a success, the darling of the columnists. Only selfishness kept me from saying the magic word to somebody in authority and turning her into Cinderella. Arguments wouldn't move her. It seemed simpler to turn off the lights when I was at home alone and not answer the door.

The air flickered again. I squinted and shook my head. This was getting a little alarming. It couldn't be the Scotch. It never happened outside the apartment. It never happened unless I was looking at that particular wall.

There was a Rousseau picture on it, *Sleeping Gypsy*, something Uncle Jim had left me along with the apartment. I made a great effort to focus on the blue-green sky, the lion's blowing mane, the striped robe of the black man on the sand.

But all I got was a blur. And then I knew I must be drunk because a sound seemed to go with the blur, a roaring that might have been the lion except that the lion had entirely vanished and I seemed to be seeing a dome of shining rosy-red light that moved like water.

I squeezed my eyes shut. This was crazy.

Uncle Jim had left me the apartment in his will. It was one of those deals where you pay a fabulous sum down and a high rental for life and call the apartment yours. I wouldn't have got into it myself but Uncle Jim did and it was nice to have a place the landlord couldn't throw me out of when somebody offered him a higher bribe.

This is probably the place for a word

about Uncle Jim Burton. He was a Character. He had red hair, freckles and a way of losing himself in foreign parts for months at a stretch. Sometimes for years.

He used to visit us between trips when I was a kid and of all the people I knew in those days he was my favorite because he took me in on a secret.

It started out as bedtime stories. All about a marvelous land called Malesco that followed the pattern for all marvelous lands. There was a beautiful princess and a wicked high priest and a dashing young hero whose adventures kept me awake for all of fifteen minutes sometimes after the lights were put out.

Those were the pre-Superman days, so I didn't picture myself soaring through Malesco in a red union suit but sometimes I wore a lion skin like Tarzan and sometimes the harness of an intrepid Martian warrior who looked like John Carter.

I even learned to speak Malescan. Uncle Jim made it up, of course. He had a restless mind, and he was recovering from some sort of illness during those months he stayed with us when the Malesco stories began. He made up a vocabulary of the language and we worked out a sort of primer together and jabbered away to each other in Malescan with a good deal of fluency before the episode came to an end and he went away again.

I sat there, watching the wall flicker, looking at the blurred rose-red globe on the wall and something like roofs beyond it, lit with a brilliant sunset. I knew I was imagining most of it. What I saw was the red blur you get when you rub your eyes hard and my imagination was making it into something very much like the tales of Malesco Uncle Jim used to tell.

THE whole thing had sunk far back into my mind in the many years since, but when I groped I seemed to dredge up a memory of a city lit with crimson sunsets and a great dome in the middle that reflected the light from a surface of—had it been water? Had it been—

The doorbell rang.

"Eddie!" Lorna's voice called loudly. "Eddie, let me in a minute."

I knew if I didn't she'd rouse the neighbors with her knocking and shouting, so I heaved myself out of the chair and sidled cautiously around that blur which was pure imagination between me and the wall where the Rousseau hung. It was odd, I thought, that the hall wasn't blurred or the front door or even Lorna's pretty, cheap little face when I let her in.

"I waited for you, Eddie," she said reproachfully, slipping in fast before I could change my mind. "What kept you? Eddie, I had to see you. I've got a new idea. Look, how would it be if I could dance a little too? Would that help? I've worked out a sort of routine I wish you'd—"

"Have a drink," I said wearily. "Let's not talk about it now, Lorna. My head aches. I think I've got eye trouble. Things keep blurring."

"—look at while I just run through it," she went right on as soon as I finished speaking. It was one of her less endearing tricks.

I shut my ears and followed her back into the living room, hoping she'd go away soon. The Rousseau Gypsy had come back anyhow. That was a comfort. The red blur which my imagination made into a vision of Malesco was entirely gone. I sat down in the same chair, sipped my Scotch and looked morosely at Lorna.

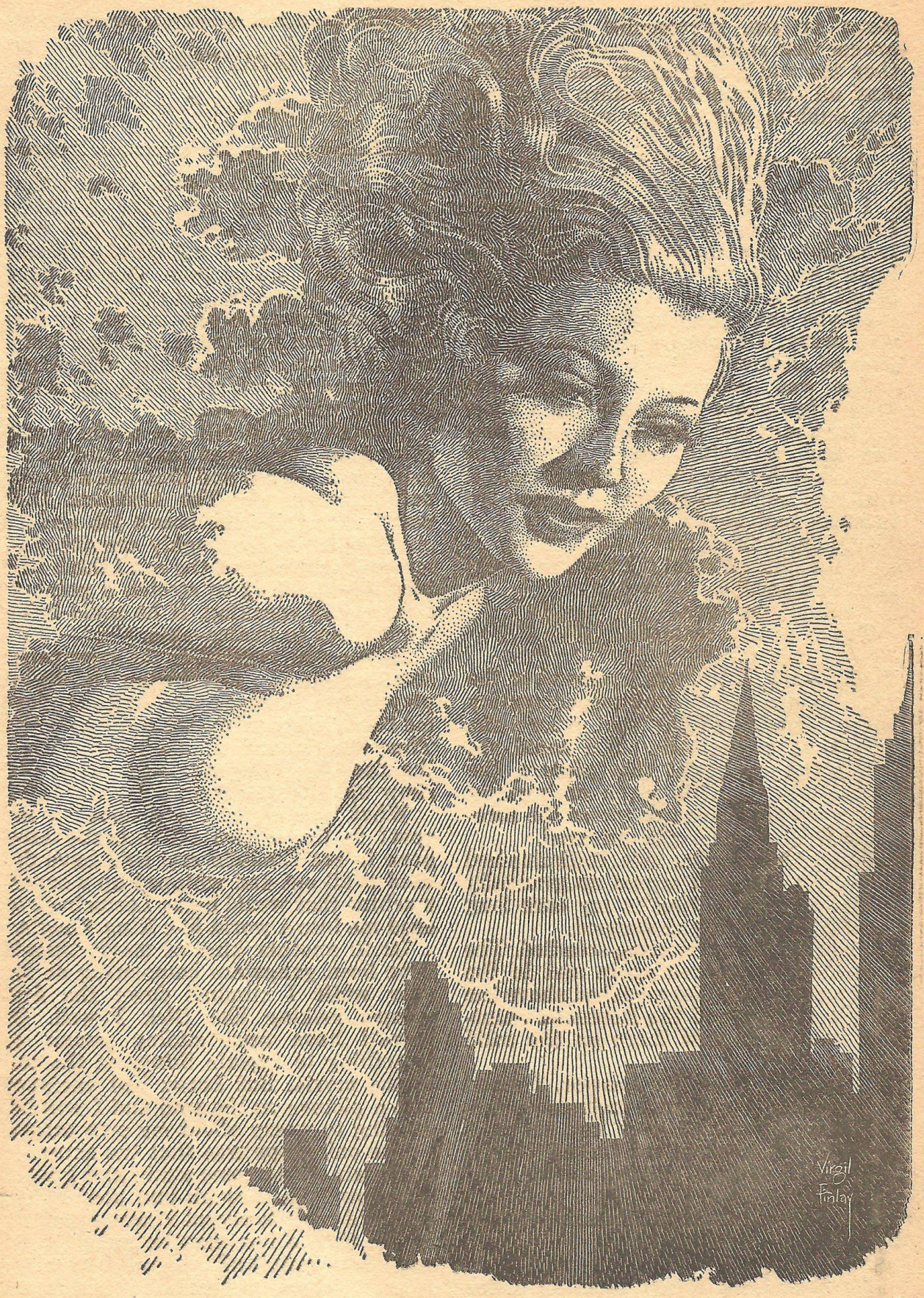
It doesn't matter what she was saying. I heard about every tenth word. She fixed herself a drink and perched girlishly on the arm of a chair, making graceful gestures with her glass, telling me all about how I was going to help her become a great dancer if I'd only say the right word to the right man.

I'd heard it all before. I yawned, looked crosseyed at the ice in my glass, drained the last of the Scotch and glanced up at the opposite wall.

This time it was pure hallucination. Instead of the Rousseau it was another kind of picture on the wall and it moved as though I were looking at a pull-down movie screen, stereoscopic, technicolored.

There it all was, clear and perfect. No imagination about it this time. Malesco—exactly as Uncle Jim had told me. A black line that looked like an iron bar ran across one corner of the picture. Beyond it, small and far away, was the city lit with sunset.

Domes, soaring columns, a shining globe that moved like water in one enor-



Another few seconds and Lorna Maxwell was smiling down from the clouds (Chap. VI)

mous sphere, surrounded by curved arches that seemed to support it though they too had a flowing upward motion. And all the intricate pattern of arches and bubbles was on fire with reflected light.

A rose-red city, half as old as time.

"Eddie, look at me!"

I didn't stir. This was like hypnosis. I couldn't turn my eyes away from that incredible hallucination. I knew Lorna hadn't seen it, for the pitch of her voice didn't change.

Maybe she couldn't see it. Maybe I was crazy. Or maybe she just hadn't glanced that way.

She was babbling something about taking her shoes off so she could show me the dance and I realized vaguely that she was thumping heavily about the floor, making like Pearl Primus maybe. I knew I ought to rub my eyes and try to make that vision go away.

"Eddie, look at me!" she insisted.

"All right, all right," I said, not looking. "It's fine."

I rubbed my eyes.

Then Lorna screamed.

MY head jerked up. I remember the coldness of ice spilling across my hand. I stared at the spot where she should have been and all I could see across the room was that picture, the sunset city with its globe of burning water and the black bar across the foreground. The whole city quivered.

I heard her scream fade. It diminished and grew thin and ceased so gradually it still seemed to ring in my ears long after I thought it had stopped.

Then the air's flickering steadied. The rose-red city blurred again and in the next moment the lion crouched above the sleeping gypsy and the Rousseau painting was unchanged there on the solid wall.

"Lorna," I said. No answer. I stood up, dropping the glass. I took a step forward and stumbled over her shoes. I ran across to the door and jerked it open. The corridor was empty outside. No footsteps sounded.

I came back and tried the kitchen, the bedroom.

No Lorna.

An hour later I was down at police headquarters, trying to tell the cops I hadn't murdered her.

An hour after that I was in jail.

CHAPTER II

Balcony Scene

I'D RATHER deal with a crook than a fanatic any day. The Assistant D.A. was a fanatic about his own theories and I found myself in a difficult spot in less than no time. This isn't the story of how circumstantial evidence can make mistakes and I won't go into detail. It was just that Lorna had left a friend waiting in the lobby, the neighbors heard her call and heard me let her in—and where was she?

I didn't try to tell the truth. I said she'd gone out. I was too rattled to remember the shoes and that was a strong point against me. The Assistant D.A. was bucking for his boss's job and he got himself so thoroughly convinced of my guilt that toward the end I think he'd have been willing to stretch a point or two, legally speaking, if he could bring a murderer to justice—me.

Maybe you remember the newspaper stories about it. I lost my part in the hit play. I got a lawyer who didn't believe me because I couldn't tell him the truth. Time went by and all that saved me was the fact that Lorna's body never did show up. Eventually they let me go.

What would you have done in my spot? In the movies I'd instantly have gone to see Einstein and he'd have figured it all out and whipped up a supermachine that would bring Lorna back or send me into a world like King Kong's.

Or in another kind of movie there'd have been gangsters hammering at the door while I climbed down the fire-escape, looking like Dick Powell. Or there'd have been sliding panels or something to explain things at the end of the movie. But Lorna had vanished into a picture on the wall and I was beginning to worry about my own sanity.

The only hope was that the shimmer in the air might come again and I could somehow lean through and haul Lorna back. I'd come to accept it that definitely by the time a few months had gone by and I'd thought it all over and been to an optometrist and a psychiatrist and found out all the things it couldn't have been. Not hallucination. Not visual disturbance. Not madness.

No, it had simply been—Malesco.

I went through Uncle Jim's books and papers after that. I found a lot of notes in a shorthand I never was able to read, then or later. I found quite a lot of stuff on alchemy, of all odd things. And I found the old Malescan primer and vocabulary, which was the one thing I really got some good out of. But not then.

Not until much later when everything broke at once. It was night again. I was sitting at home drinking Scotch again. And again a bell rang but this time the phone. It was my attorney. He talked fast and carefully.

"Listen, Burton," he said. "A body's been picked up in the Sound. A floater. Your friend Thompson's got the lab working on it. He thinks it's the Maxwell woman."

"Lorna's not dead," I said stupidly. "At least not—"

"All right. Take it easy. It's just that I'm a little worried. This is what Thompson's been waiting for, you know."

"They can't possibly identify—"

"After this long it's mostly guesswork anyhow. But Thompson's got the experts working for him, and juries have a way of believing experts. They might—just might—make it stick, Burton."

SO THAT was that—crisis. And what could I do? If I ran they'd pick me up. If I stayed, they'd probably convict me. I hung up the phone and went back to my chair, pausing on the way to tap with insane hopefulness at the Rousseau. If I tore my way through that wall would I come out on the other side into Malesco? Would Lorna be there or was she that floater after all?

"Lorna?" I said inquiringly into the empty air. "Lorna?"

I waited. No answer. And yet there was something more than silence. My voice had a curious echoing quality as if I'd spoken in a tunnel. Malesco, of course, didn't exist. It was a fairy-tale land like Oz and Wonderland out of a childhood story. But I had a sudden, compelling certainty that my voice echoed when I called to Lorna and echoed in Malesco.

"Lorna!" I said it louder. *"Lorna!"* This time it was a shout. But a hollow and ghostly shout, echoing and reechoing down a long invisible tunnel, dying away at the far end—in Malesco.

"Lorna!"

The shrill hum of the doorbell cut through the echoing of my voice. The police? I spun around—but as I moved the walls tilted sickeningly. Either I couldn't stop turning or the room was falling sidewise—no, collapsing in a direction I didn't understand.

The doorbell sang its thin, shrill summons, over and over, farther and farther away. For I was falling.

I saw a man's face whirl by in darkness. He wore a queer headdress and his mouth was wide open with a look of surprise and terror. He was pointing a weapon at me.

He slid sidewise and vanished. I slipped down a wire of singing sound, clinging to it as to a lifeline, pausing, falling, sliding into an abyss. Then the ringing wire of sound grew thinner. It began to fade. It no longer supported me.

I was falling.

A black horizontal line whipped up, vertical bars appeared and I saw suddenly that my hands were gripping them, sliding down slowly. Instinct had sent its red warning flashing through my body—"Grab! Hang on! *Hang on!*"

This was real. There was no singing void around me any more. But there was a very real void under me and a terribly real pavement a million feet straight down. I was clutching the outside of a balcony rail with both hands and dangling over a drop I couldn't let myself think about.

Was this, I wondered frantically, the usual method of entering Malesco? If it was the way Lorna came then I was wasting my time. Lorna would be a long time dead by now, down there on that horribly distant, horribly hard-looking pavement, in the pink sunset light.

I couldn't see anything except the bars I clung to, the wall in front of me and a sickening angle of vertical building ending in pavement far down. I didn't see the city. The only important things were very near ones—real, vital, beautiful things like a ledge in the wall or a cornice I could brace my foot against.

If I'd been sent back to New York right then I'd have had exactly this to say about Malesco—one, railings are made of some hard slick metal too thin and slippery to hold on long. Two, building walls are stone or plastic or metal or something, maybe pre-fab, and there aren't any joints or cracks and it's a very poor way to build a wall.

I simply didn't have the strength to get over that balcony rail. But I got over it. My simian progenitors sent me a cable along the instinct channel, my feet became prehensile in spite of my shoes and the ancient basic terror of the long drop spurred me on. I don't like to think about it even now. I don't know how I did it.

But eventually I levered myself over and felt the balcony floor under my feet. The simian strength went back where it came from, millions of years in my biological past. My remote ancestor, Bandar-Log Burton, returned to hunting his antediluvian fleas and a still older ancestor, a mere blob of protoplasm, became dominant.

I felt like jelly. My protoplasm carried me with reeling rapidity across the balcony and through an open window. I found myself in a medium-sized room with the guy who had tried to shoot me.

CHAPTER III

I Knew Malesco

THE room was empty except for my new acquaintance. I mean empty. There wasn't a thing in it except that in the four upper corners were good-sized cups of corroded steel or iron. The walls were blue-green and the floor was darker green and gave slightly underfoot. The pink light of sunset cast my shadow ahead of me across the walls.

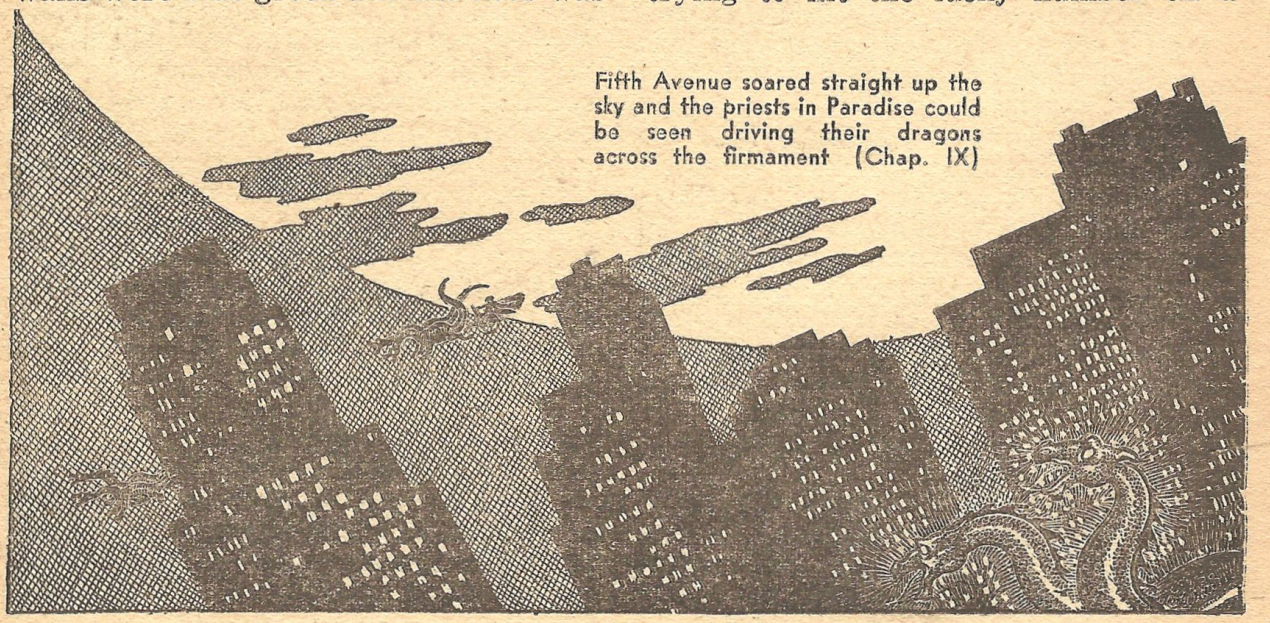
There were two doors. At one of them was my friend with the odd headdress, which was perched at a drunken angle so that one flap hung over his eye and the other at the back of his head. He had his ear against the door panel, listening, paying no attention to me.

I got an impression of a thin middle-aged face alert with apprehension, a shirt with what looked like a coffee-stain on it and long red-flannel drawers. I had just time to realize that it was the sunset light which made them look so crimson. Then the man heard my footstep, twisted around, saw me and fell into a fit of violent indecision.

He tried to do several things at once. He seemed to want to open the door and run. He wanted to yell for help. He wanted to pull out his equivalent of a police positive and kill me.

What he did was run at me, grip me around the waist and shove me back on the balcony. Before I knew what was happening, the guy had stuffed me halfway over the rail again. Don't think I wasn't resisting. I was. But what can an amoeba do?

A couple of times he could simply have let go and I'd have fallen. But he didn't let go. To him, it seemed, I was a square peg and he was frantically trying to find a square hole in space to fit me. He was trying to hit the lucky number on a



Fifth Avenue soared straight up the sky and the priests in Paradise could be seen driving their dragons across the firmament (Chap. IX)

Virgil
Finlay

punchboard and using me to do it.

All the while he was looking around in a worried fashion, glancing down, trying to prevent my falling, looking over his shoulder, up at the sky and shaking at the flap of his headdress, which had twisted around even farther so that he could scarcely see at all.

As for me, I was in a nightmare. There was a ridiculous temptation to stay passive and wait till I'd been stuffed into that square hole in space. Maybe *he* could find it, I thought. I never had exactly in thirty-odd years. All I'd found were round holes.

On that philosophical point I got a grip on myself, grabbed my friend around the neck and hauled myself back to safety. Neither of us was in a state suitable for a ten-round scrap. I hit him somewhere, he snatched at his belt and brought up a weapon like a little dumbbell and I hit him again.

He gripped the ends of the dumbbell in each hand and pulled it apart. A silent flash of blue light streamed between his clenched fists. He looked at me. I could see only half his face because of that striped flap but in his one visible eye there was desperation. Then it looked past me. A shadow fell on us. The man hesitated.

I knocked the weapon out of his hand. As the two globes fell they snapped together and the blue light was gone. My opponent must have gone crazy, because he stooped to pick up his gadget and I gave him a fast rabbit punch. I had just enough strength left me to make it effective. He kept on stooping until he lay flat on his face, motionless.

I looked around and saw some kind of aircraft moving between me and what was left of the sun. It was a good distance away and for an instant it reminded me of a galleon. It had a cobwebby filigree appearance as it slid across the red bisected sphere.

Beneath it lay the city with its domes and swooping roads and spires. And there was the fiery ball of moving light or water, supported by its shifting arches. So this was Malesco.

I KNEW Malesco. Uncle Jim had told me about it too often for me not to know the place when I saw it.

I was just glancing shudderingly down at a formal garden below, in a sort of clear, shadowy well of air lit by sunset, when a deep sigh from my fallen enemy made me turn abruptly.

He hadn't moved. But I went rapidly back into the room and stood listening. Once I thought I heard footsteps outside but they ceased and there was only silence except for a muffled distant murmur of voices now and then. I opened the door, the one my murderous friend had been listening at, and peered out through a narrow crack. I saw a hall well lighted.

I closed that door and tried the other one across the room. Beyond was another chamber of the same size with the same rusty cups in the upper corners. The wall opposite the door was a machine. At any rate it was solid with dials and panels and levers and things. It had a round flat face about as tall as I was. I looked at it. It looked at me. Nothing happened.

For the rest of the room, there was a curtain across one corner that screened a sort of clothes closet. In the middle of the floor was a small table. On the table was the remnant of a meal. There was a crust of bread, the green dregs of liquid in a cup and a fruit or vegetable the size of a radish with a worm-hole in its pink skin.

On the floor by the table, lying as if someone had dropped it, was a crumpled black robe. Beside the bread-crust lay a tablet with circles drawn on it, most of them connected by straight lines, and the whole thing irritably crossed out with a few heavy strokes. I don't know why I thought of tic-tac-toe.

I walked back and forth, studying the machine hopefully from several angles. It made not the slightest sense to me. However, it would have made just as much sense if it had been a Ford motor or a vacuum cleaner, so I let it go and went back to see if my victim had wakened.

He hadn't. I rolled him over and investigated. He wore a light tunic, heavy brown sandals, tight ankle-length trousers, pure white except for the dirt, and the striped headdress.

Oh, yes—he wore a bracelet and a ring on his left wrist and middle finger, and they were connected by a flexible band of the same metal—bluish-green. There was a pouch in his belt and, as I touched it—just before I touched it—the thing made a noise at me, like a rattlesnake giving warning.

Then it said something in a language I automatically translated and understood before I realized what that language was.

"Temple Headquarters," it remarked. *"From the Priest of the Night. Falvi!"*

Two thoughts collided inside my head. One of them brought my gaze down to my victim's striped headdress and the other made my lips move silently as I repeated the words I had just heard spoken. One and one are two. One and one are—Malesco.

All of a sudden, I was remembering Uncle Jim's bedtime stories and how striped headdresses had occasionally figured in those tales. Those who wore them bore the rank of—what had it been? Priest. And that meant—

My mind clamped down and rejected such an impossibility. I stood up, took a deep breath and wished I hadn't.

FOR THIS was the moment I'd been avoiding—the moment when I couldn't keep moving and would have to start thinking and realizing. I was in another world. (What world? Oh, no! I wasn't quite ready to believe *that* yet.)

The only other explanation was that I'd gone crazy and was really in a bed in Bellevue with doctors looking at me thoughtfully and remarking, "Obviously a hopeless case. Shall we try shock treatment, or should we experiment with that new method, the one that killed all the Rhesus monkeys?"

Meanwhile, at my feet was an unconscious priest and beyond the railing lay the city, no longer rose-red, but darkening into evening. The sun had gone. Night came quickly here. I looked out over the eerily familiar view I'd dreamed of so often as a child.

The sense of wonder hadn't hit me yet. I wasn't even incredulous—yet. Anybody pitched headforemost into Oz or Graustark or any other familiar unreal world and finding it a real place after all would expect to be half-stunned by disbelief. I wasn't. There was no use disbelieving in Malesco—here it was. After a while, I told myself, I'll start being surprised. Then, there wasn't time.

The thing that I wanted to think about most when I got a moment was Uncle Jim. It had been no series of bedtime tales he'd told me then. He *knew* Malesco. All right—had he been here in person?

Had he just found some way to open the door between the worlds and look through, maybe listen, since he'd learned the language? I wanted time to think about it but I hadn't any to spare right now. Too much was going on.

One thing was certain—the Malesco Uncle Jim described to me had been the description of an eyewitness. There was the great flowing dome with its spires of bright water. He hadn't mentioned the patterns of lights visible all over the city after dark, though. Some of them were colored, some of them formed words. I could read Malescan. I knew advertising when I saw it.

This isn't happening, this isn't real, this is a dream I'm having and I'm ten years old again and Uncle Jim made the whole thing up.

The pouch at the priest's belt buzzed. Then it said something in a thin, inquiring voice.

. . *"Falvi! Responde!"*

Responde was pronounced the way it was written. I knew what it meant. *Falvi* I didn't know. It might be a proper noun. It might be the name of my priest. If so, Falvi wasn't going to *responde* and I guessed what would probably happen.

I thought I might be safer, somehow, out there in the city. Since there were lights—there would be darkness, too.

CHAPTER IV

Lorna's New Look

BECAUSE I was in a hurry, I probably wasn't too logical. I'd wasted time. Since the priest had tried to kill me at sight—or at least to stuff me back where I came from through a hole in space and had not seemed to care much whether I fell to the pavement below in the process—I could probably expect similar treatment from other priests. At any rate it was hardly safe to assume I wouldn't *get* similar treatment.

I went into the room where the machine was, gazed up stupidly at its enigmatic round flat face and turned away, looking for that black cloak. I shook it out, snapped it around my throat, and discovered there were little magnetic clasps all along the front of it, so that

when I pulled it down it fell neatly shut.

Then sudden panic seized me. What was I doing here anyway? What were my chances of finding Lorna in a bedtime-story world which I was probably dreaming up as I went along? The place for me was back in New York, where I came from. I turned rapidly and trotted back to the balcony, the cloak flapping at my heels.

I leaned out over the rail and the emptiness and began to grope in the air. But I didn't feel New York.

What a hole in space would feel like was uncertain, of course. Rather like the hole in a doughnut, maybe. I had no real hope that I could get hold of something in my own apartment that was solidly anchored and haul myself home that way. It was too much like trying to lift myself by my bootstraps.

And yet I found myself violently reluctant to leave that balcony and go out in a world I didn't know at all. In a curious sort of way I'd been born into Malesco at this spot and I was too young in Malescan experience to like the prospect of seeking fame and fortune in a world I never made.

I a stranger and afraid—in a world I never made. . . .

I had made Earth, you know. Everyone shapes a little part of his environment and his parents and ancestors shaped other parts. Maybe that's why it will take a long time for people to get used to living on Venus or Mars. Anyhow, there was a queer sort of silver-cord feeling that held me to the balcony.

Suddenly I thought with some bitterness of the tales written about just such miracles as the one I was undergoing. Burroughs, in particular, and Haggard. But I wasn't on Barsoom now and I wasn't John Carter. He was made of the stuff of mythical heroes. He was indestructible.

I didn't feel specially heroic but of course one never knows. And the heroism of one society is the rank cowardice of another. Malescan ethics might differ considerably from terrestrial ones. I didn't really think they would but you never know.

My trouble was that I could be killed.

I hadn't thought much about such things back home. You don't lean too far out of high windows, you don't step in front of speeding cars and you don't touch hot wires because you've heard of electricity. Okay. In Malesco there was gravity and it seemed the usual kind. I could allow for that. But what about the unknown forces like electricity?

A Malescan in a subway in New York might very well sit on the third rail because it looked innocuous. In Malesco, I might sit on an atomic power plant without recognizing it. The priest's dumbbell-shaped weapon seemed to indicate some non-electrical force activating it, and the machine in the other room might operate on some power I'd never heard of. Luckily I could read Malescan. I decided to keep my eyes open for signs reading CAVE! No, that was Latin—Malescan would be CAVEO.

I WASN'T getting very far, leaning over this rail searching the air. The priest might wake up at any moment and I would have to make up my mind whether to run, hide or throw myself on his mercy, such as it was.

I went back thoughtfully into the room and looked down at him. He was starting to twitch a little. Even in repose his face looked irritable and impulsive. It had better be either run or hide, I told myself. Preferably hide—but where?

There was the alcove with a rack of cloaks and robes behind a curtain. There wasn't any other cover I could think of and I didn't dare go out into the hall and take a chance on other priests coming at me with dumbbells flashing blue fire.

This was the point at which the heroes of the conventional tales perform some miracle of physical or mental prowess and get the upper hand with the ease of long practice. But it was all new to me. I didn't feel heroic and I had no resources whatever.

In the room where the priest lay I heard a thin voice call, *"Falvi!"* again. A groan answered it. The prostrate priest moved his hand. I was as good as caught and I knew it. This was the spot where John Carter would have sprung easily to the top of a ten-foot wall that providentially didn't quite reach the ceiling, there to lie hidden while his enemies searched in vain.

They never looked up, of course. But all the walls here reached to the ceiling and even if they hadn't I gravely doubted my ability to dart up them like a startled cat. I wasn't as resourceful as Carter. The best thing that occurred to

me was to dive into that clothes closet and burrow my way among the robes into the corner. If I squatted down the black cloak I was wearing would hide my feet.

It wasn't very good. Fortunately for me it didn't have to be. If I wasn't a resourceful hero, neither was my adversary a very resourceful villain. He was just an ordinary guy who'd been knocked out and felt rattled and confused when he finally came to.

Between two garments and the edge of the curtain I saw him sit up, groan and put his head in his hands. The voice at his waist said irritably, *"Falvi! Responde!"*

He shook his head a couple of times, looked dizzily around, and then suddenly muttered something and scrambled to his feet. His face was frightened. It was worse than frightened. For some reason he was on a spot so bad that things couldn't possibly get worse and somehow or other I was responsible.

I knew that. I knew by the way he looked around the room, obviously searching for me. I was very glad I wasn't in plain sight. My refuge seemed pitiably inadequate now but it was too late to change it. Luckily the priest seemed to be an amateur too at this sort of thing.

He scuttled out on the balcony and I watched his back as he bent over the edge and peered hopefully downward. Since I wasn't visible, either climbing down the wall or spread out on the pavement below, he came back again and this time his eye caught the half-open door to the hall.

It was sheer luck that I had left it open. He must have jumped to the conclusion that I had fled. Of course he had no way of knowing how long he'd been unconscious. It might have been hours and I might have got clear away a long time ago.

He hurried to the door and I heard him take a few uncertain steps outside. But he came back in a moment and shut the door firmly. By the look on his face I was sure he had ulcers. He was the kind of guy who always does have ulcers.

The little voice at his belt called again and this time he took a thing like a white waffle out of his pouch and did something very odd. He yawned into it. That is, he made the noises a man makes when he's slowly waking out of deep sleep.

I was surprised but not entirely by the yawn. A light had gone on beyond his shoulder, out there in the slowly lighting city, and sheer astonishment made me blank to everything but the thing I saw spread across the whole side of a building about a block away.

It was a picture of Lorna's face.

It must have been huge, though from where I crouched I could see it all and it looked small in perspective. The picture was illuminated and something like stained glass, though not formalized the way stained glass pictures usually are. I knew it was Lorna's face but for a long moment I just didn't believe it.

It was Lorna's face, all right, but glamorized as though Arden had collaborated with Rubinstein and then turned it over to a Romney who's become a religious idealist. Just as Romney had on canvas given Lady Hamilton qualities that essentially bird-brained woman never possessed, so this super-electric sign changed Lorna Maxwell into a very beautiful woman with a strangely etherealized appearance.

OVER the portrait head was a huge golden A—a rather mystifying letter which I noticed standing alone in gold lights elsewhere here and there through the city. It seemed to mean something. Under Lorna's portrait was the word or name CLIA.

"Falvi!"

I'd almost got used to that thin urgent voice. It was the answering voice that brought my attention back—a drowsy startled murmur, then the falsely brisk tone of a man suddenly awakened.

"In the name of the Phoenix. Falvi to the Hierarch. There is peace in the Earth-Gates watchroom."

"Were you asleep?"

"I—ah—I was contemplating the mysteries."

"You'll have a chance to contemplate the mysteries in solitude when I report this to the Hierarch." There was a pause. Then—"Falvi, if you're sleepy I'll put someone else on. But I'm supposed to be responsible tonight. If there's trouble the Hierarch will devour my—" There followed a word I didn't understand.

"Sorry," Falvi said. "Could you get some other priest to take over? I—I think I'm sick."

"Right away," the thin voice agreed and there was silence, in which I could hear Falvi's hard breathing.

I stood perfectly motionless, waiting. Curiously, though Falvi and his communicant sounded nothing at all like Uncle Jim, I'd had a ghostly feeling that it was Uncle Jim who spoke. For their language was Malescan and it was only in his voice that I had ever heard that tongue spoken before.

Of course I hadn't understood every nuance of meaning. But obvious shades of inflection in the voices made the sense unmistakable. Malescan is a simple language, though until now I had never realized just how simple it really was. I'd never questioned it any more than you question pig-Latin or any childhood memory of a code.

Malescan is pronounced the way it's spelled, or at least the way Uncle Jim spelled it in his notes and the illuminated signs I'd seen confirmed most of his spelling. Then too it seemed based on Latin and anybody who remembers his high-school Latin can make a good guess at the meanings of any language that stems from it.

Falvi came to the doorway and looked out across the city. He said a low word under his breath. Then I realized that Malescan stems partly from Anglo-Saxon too.

"Obscenity New York!" Falvi said furiously, and before I could realize the full implications of that reference, he turned back into the room and disappeared.

New York—he *had* said New York.

I GAZED across the city at the beautiful transfigured face of Lorna Maxwell and longed for the safe familiar environment of Barsoom.

Falvi was speaking again.

"Coriole," he said quietly. "Dom Coriole!"

There was a wild buzzing which ended in a squeaky voice that said "—wanted me to make the robe for her and I'm just too good-natured to say no but where I'll get time to—"

"Private beam!" Falvi snapped—or perhaps it was "line" or "circuit." I couldn't translate literally. But I got the sense of the words and heard them as colloquial rather than formalized because I was used to thinking colloquially myself.

There was a pause during which Falvi's gaze moved uneasily about the room. I shrank back shyly among the cloaks. Then an oily giggle sounded.

"I am in spasms," said a thin voice. "Yes, positively in spasms. Purdelor has told me the funniest quip I've heard in years. I nearly split myself laughing. I laughed till I cried. Do you remember Dom Pheres? He always insisted—"

"Coriole, listen! This is Falvi. Somebody else has come through."

—"insisted that his name ought to be pronounced Peres—don't interrupt, I must tell you this."

Falvi was trying to mention somebody named or called the Hierarch.

"Be quiet," Coriole said with thin cheerfulness. "Insisted that his name ought to be pronounced Peres—you have that? So Morander, one evening over dinner said, "If you please, Dom Peres, will you hand me the *paselae?' Paselae!* Oh, ha, ha, ha, ha!" There were wild giggles.

"Damnatio!" Falvi said, presumably seeing no more point to the joke than I did. I felt a twinge of sympathy for the harassed priest. What Coriole needed was an appreciative studio audience, I thought. But I was underestimating the man.

Falvi said with furious patience, "I was guarding the Earth-Gates tonight and another one came through—a man, this time—and he knocked me out and got away. Ha, *ha.*"

Coriole's chuckles died.

"Well," he said, "I suppose you were playing with the Earth-Gates—"

"I never touched them."

"Lie to the Hierarch if you like but don't try it with me, Falvi. What was the man like, eh?"

It was a curious sensation to me, cowering in the clothes closet, hearing myself accurately described. I had a momentary sense of having been discovered, as though the shadows had been driven away by a bright light. I stared at Lorna's face beyond Falvi and the balcony. That steadied me.

Very often in Malesco I needed that steadiness. I kept finding myself inclined to slip over into an odd state in which everything seemed quite unreal and it was difficult to move or even think.

A touch of that helpless passivity gripped me now, and for a second Falvi seemed unimportant and unreal. The

fact that he was announcing his decision to find and kill me had an abstruse interest, no more than that.

"If you harm him I'll break your neck," Coriole said. "You hear me?"

"All right, I won't touch him," Falvi said in an unconvincing tone. "If any of the other priests have found him he may be dead already. I don't know."

"He sounds like the man you say Clia described. Well, meet me at the Baths immediately."

"But this is the night the—"

"Bless me, this is the night I thought I was on horseback," Coriole said and chuckled again. A humorist, part of my mind said. The other part was considering Lorna's face a block away and the name CLIA under it. So I sounded like the man Clia described, did I? That meant Clia was Lorna, a deduction which required little brilliance on my part.

"It's nothing to joke about," Falvi said. "The Hierarch won't believe I didn't touch the Earth-Gates."

"Naturally he won't," Coriole said. "He knows you're a liar. Meet me at the Baths immediately. Hurry along. This man who came through may be exactly what we need. If you harm him I'll be inclined to wash my hands of you."

"Listen, if he's wandering through the Temple in the clothes he had on he'll be stopped before—"

"There's been no alarm yet, has there? Come along. Leave the thinking to me. I'm qualified for it. And don't try to act on your own. You're not indispensable."

"Perhaps you're not either."

At this Coriole burst into wild thin giggles, sounding rather like a disembodied goblin, and gasped, "Saturn mend you, indeed! It would be less trouble to make a new one. Oh, hurry along. When I explain you'll see why we need this man alive. Less trouble to make—" The giggling died.

"Damned comedian," Falvi said under his breath, then, louder, "Your jokes smell. You're a fool, Coriole. Nobody thinks you're funny. And if I find that man I'll kill him so fast he won't even notice. Maybe it doesn't matter to you whether or not I get in trouble but—"

His words became mutters. I gathered that the walkie-talkie had been turned off before Falvi began his diatribe. This seemed to indicate that Falvi was both sensible and cautious.

Then a door slammed and it was time for me to decide what to do next.

CHAPTER V

Cat and Mouse

THAT was not difficult to figure out but the trouble was to put any sort of plan into action. Any move I made might reveal my identity to enemies. And I had excellent reason to suspect that this temple or palace or skyscraper was full of potential enemies, all quite willing to kill me on sight once they discovered I was no Malescan.

So I had to find Lorna. I was completely blindfolded. What I needed most of all was information. What I most wanted was information about how to get home. Meanwhile I badly needed to be briefed. Lorna—going under the name of Clia, I gathered—had found a safe spot in Malesco. I couldn't tell how

[*Turn page*]

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she'd done it nor, naturally, did I know exactly how safe that spot might be. But if some sesame existed I'd like to know it.

It was quite simple—I was in a dark labyrinth, full of pitfalls and traps, and there was a gleam of light in the distance. So I had to reach that light, which meant information and perhaps help. My immediate goal was Lorna and I didn't dare think beyond that. While I hated the idea of leaving the room which connected, somehow, with my New York apartment, finding Lorna would mean a very real contact with my own world because at least she wasn't a vague hole in space.

It took me no time at all to make sure the room was empty, cautiously emerge from the closet and, on second thought, dive back into it and search till I located a headdress with flaps such as Falvi wore. It had blue stripes and shadowed my face effectively when I donned it. Then I went to the outside door and peeped out in time to see Falvi walk through a doorway down the hall and disappear.

That left the hall quite empty. I stepped boldly out and hurried after Falvi, passing a few closed doors. Along the ceiling there were more of the metal cups, pouring out light, a milky flowing glow that dissolved in the air and gave a gentle daylight illumination.

Several I passed were burned out and another one was flickering wanly. On the doors themselves I noticed symbols engraved—a formalized bird and a trident on each one and Roman numerals—XVI, XVII, and so forth.

Where Falvi had vanished was an opening in the wall, as large as a doorway. It seemed to be a small elevator shaft, lighted from within. A foreshortened Falvi was twenty feet below, floating down very gently.

I supposed it was Falvi but all I could see were the headdress and his feet. He resembled a squashed dwarf. He didn't look up and I laid one hand on the wall to brace myself and stared down at him.

There seemed to be no cables nor other mechanical elevator devices, though of course Falvi might be standing on a perfectly transparent floor that was slowly sinking beneath him. I noticed his shadow appear on the wall behind him and vanish as he went on down.

When I looked up I saw part of my own shadow — the deformed head startled me till I remembered the flaps of my headdress—across the shaft, so I understood that Falvi was dropping past similar openings on other floors.

I leaned farther out and counted the brighter patches of illumination. Falvi went down seven levels before he stepped out. Then the shaft was empty and it seemed to go on down for quite a distance.

I was considering the possibility of tossing something into the shaft as a test to see if it would float or plunge when my shadow on the opposite wall blurred slightly and became suddenly double. My state of mind by now was such that I found myself seriously considering whether I could possibly have two heads. In the same instant I turned to see what had cast the shadow.

I found myself looking into a pair of very bright expectant eyes on a level with mine. Another priest had come up behind me without a sound and was watching me with a look that reminded me uncomfortably of a cat watching a mouse.

There were extraordinary alertness and anticipation in the face between the flaps of the priestly headdress. He was young and there was a faintly dissipated air about him as though he'd had a big night recently. He wore his robes with a certain negligent elegance that was far from ecclesiastic.

I went into a state of concealed shock. How long had he been following me? From Falvi's door? And why? That expectancy on his face was frightening. He was so clearly waiting for me to do something. But what? From the penetrating interest of his eyes I was ready to believe that he was reading my innermost thoughts and finding them, on the whole, rather amusing.

I had no idea what one priest did when he met another. Before I could come to any decision about how to save my hide, though, he saved it for me by murmuring, *"Pardae-se,"* in a polite voice and squeezing past me into the shaft, still not taking that ironic gaze from mine.

I had a strong impression that he knew exactly what had been happening and was simply waiting for me to give myself away. He lifted one eyebrow at me as he slowly sank, a quizzical look that seemed to ask what I was waiting for.

That decided me. After all, what would John Carter have done? The priest was about ten feet down, his head still tilted back to watch me and a grin was beginning to broaden upon his face. I took a deep breath and stepped out into emptiness, confidently expecting a sort of anti-gravity sky-hook to grip me and lower me gently down the shaft.

This did not happen. I dropped like a bullet, head over basket, with the full velocity and acceleration of a free-falling body. I had a glimpse of the priest floating down calmly beneath me—he seemed to be standing still—and then I hit him and we were in a wild Laocoon group, with me playing the python.

He grabbed me, not that it was necessary, because I was hanging on to him like a frantic cat. There was a brief, mad scuffle, which subsided gradually. Clinging together, we drifted slowly downward.

OUR faces were quite close now, naturally enough, and the priest's was full of triumphant excitement. I had an idea that I had given myself hopelessly away and that this was just what he'd expected. The look on his face said he knew I was from New York, knew I'd come through Falvi's forbidden Earth-Gates, whatever they were, and the next stop would be the ecclesiastical firing squad.

Just to clinch the matter he spoke to me. It was, of course, Malescan and it meant nothing at all. My ears were ringing anyhow and I was shaking all over with shock and sheer unheroic fright. The shaft below us looked bottomless. I breathed hard and stared into the bright triumphant eyes about six inches from mine.

He repeated himself more slowly and this time I understood.

"You're lucky I caught you," he said. "You might get reported."

I had heard enough of the spoken Malescan tongue to catch the right emphasis and accent. But I still wasn't sure I could speak it naturally. I had to try though. My words came out in a series of gasps—an excellent way of disguising unfamiliarity with a language, by the way.

"I was thinking of something else," I said.

The effect on him was tremendous. I think if I hadn't been clutching him so tightly he might have let me drop in his surprise. For a moment I wondered if I'd made some astounding error in speech. Then I realized that the fact I'd spoken at all—in Malescan—was what startled him so much. He hadn't expected it. His face went perfectly blank for a moment.

When expression came back to it he allowed only the slightest glimmer of what must have been great disappointment to show through before he pulled himself together and spoke again. This time the malicious expectancy and the penetrating intentness of his look had vanished.

"What did you say?" he asked politely.

"I said I was thinking of something else."

A flicker of the keen suspicion came back into the quick gaze he turned on me. I realized then that I simply didn't know Malescan well enough to pass as a native.

"Well, you'd better think of the Hierarch next time," the priest said, his eyes never swerving from mine. "What are you talking like that for?"

"I bit my tongue," I said hastily.

"Bit your nose?" he asked. "How could you do that? Oh, your *tongue*."

I met his bright stare briefly and then glanced aside at the walls, slipping up slowly around us. Was he simply amusing himself with me? I wasn't sure and I didn't think he was either. Certainly he was suspicious but he had nothing definite to go on. The fact that I could speak Malescan even passably seemed to knock the bottom out of whatever theory he had formulated about me. Still—

"Where do you want out?" he asked, still politely, his tone making a rather insolent contrast to the look on his face.

"I'm going to the Baths," I hazarded.

"Oh, are you? I'll let you off at the main floor, then. I don't know you, do I? You must be fresh from the Crucible."

I nodded.

"No?" the priest said. "But—"

"I mean yes," I corrected, making a mental note on the permutations of symbolic gestures in various cultures. "I'm still fresh from the Crucible."

"A little too fresh," he told me. "You must be from Ferae. Nothing personal but the Feraen dialect is suitable only for talking to dogs. I'm Dio and I know the best"—he used a word I didn't catch

—"in the city if you need advice."

"Thanks," I said, wondering if I should tell him my name and finding my mind totally blank when it came to choosing a Malescan *nom-de-guerre.* I didn't know enough about proper nouns. I might ignorantly call myself the equivalent of Santa Claus or Little Bo Peep.

I grimaced and said my tongue hurt.

He seemed to be thinking. "Did *I* bite your nose?" he asked suddenly. "I don't remember doing it. But when you fell on me that way—"

"It's all right," I said.

"Where's your pouch?"

"I forgot it."

"Don't they teach you anything at the Ferae crucible?" He glanced up the shaft. "Here we are." He lunged forward, carrying me, and we found ourselves standing in a room the size of Grand Central, quite as noisy and crowded and busy. To the left was a great open archway with darkness beyond. The fresh wind blowing in told me it was the open air.

"No use going back for your pouch now," the priest Dio said, reaching toward his belt. "I'll lend you some grain." He put a few coins into my hand. "Don't forget to pay it back. I'm Dio, remember, on the twenty-third Goose of Hermogenes at the fifth Cherub."

"Well—thanks," I said. He looked at me blandly. His dissipated young face had lost its brilliant intentness now and was a little sleepy, as if with satisfaction. Sometime during our brief conversation he had come to a decision about me.

I couldn't make him out at all. If Falvi's prognosis were right any priest who recognized me for a newcomer from Earth was pretty certain to shoot first and ask questions later. Why I didn't know yet.

Dio's behavior was simply confusing the issue still further. If he knew me for a stranger, he ought to report me. If he didn't, why was he looking so complacent now? He was the cat that had swallowed the canary, and found it more than satisfying.

"I hope they taught you honesty at the Ferae Crucible," he said.

Was he really going to let me go? I could hardly believe it. There might even be time to catch up with Falvi, given a little luck.

"I'll pay you back," I said. "Don't worry."

HE shrugged and I started to turn away, hardly believing my own good fortune. Either Falvi had exaggerated the danger that waited me from the priests or—

"Just a minute, you," Dio's voice hailed me over the half-dozen steps that parted us. I knew by the tone of it, even before I turned, that he was grinning. The bright malice was on his face again as our eyes met.

"I think there's something you ought to know," he said. "There haven't been any Crucibles in Ferae for thirty years." He beamed at me. "Well, good night," he said and stood there, smiling.

I felt exactly as if he'd kicked me in the stomach. There *was* danger. If I'd ever seen danger in my life I saw it in his face. He knew all about me or enough about me to get me killed. And yet he was still standing there, still smiling, waiting for me to go.

I took a tentative backward step as soon as I could breathe again. He was perfectly capable of letting me get to the very door before he raised a shout and set the pack on me. It was open season for Earthmen, all right, and Dio liked the idea.

I thought, "He'll give me sixty seconds, then he'll yell," and I turned and walked toward the door with long, firm steps. The best I could hope for was to get out into the dark before he started the alarm. It wasn't much but it offered a better chance than this crowded hall.

I glanced around nervously at the thronging priests. They were all dressed alike here except that some didn't wear the outer robes and others were bareheaded. Even in my alarm I noticed the surprisingly atypical haircuts of Malesco.

One priest had a ruff of red hair rising up like a rooster's comb, another had the front of his head shaved and long ringlets hanging down the back. A third had a shaved parting down the center, more than an inch wide. They looked funny to me then but if Dio raised the alarm before I got to the door they'd probably cease to look funny and become wholly frightening.

I was six steps from the door. I was one step from the door. I stepped out under it onto the lighted steps. I couldn't

help glancing back as I hurried down into the darkness. Dio's glance had flicked away from me as he lifted a hand and nodded casually to a passing priest. As I turned I saw his eyes come back to me and he stroked his jaw in an affectionate way.

I kept going, heading toward the open archway ahead. I was feeling foolish again in the uncertain letdown. Was there any danger after all? *Had* Falvi known what he was talking about? Certainly Coriole, whoever he was, seemed to take my danger seriously. If I could find Falvi and follow him to Coriole maybe I could find out the truth.

Beyond the arch was a formal garden, stretched out into a park that ended at a high wall. But from the threshold itself a paved road ran straight to another gate in the wall and a line had formed there. I hurried in that direction, trying to accustom my eyes to the night.

Just at the gate was a splash of light from one of the overhead metal cups and there was a priest standing casually behind a tall crystal vase as high as his waist. As the line moved forward and each priest came abreast of the vase he tossed a coin into it. The cashier seemed too bored to pay much attention to his job though he kept one steady eye on the vase.

I joined the line, looking back. Through the open arch leading into the great hall I could see the moving throngs but I couldn't see Dio now. That didn't mean anything. I felt very very anxious to get on the other side of the temple wall. What I would do there I didn't know yet but—

There were a dozen priests ahead of me, moving forward slowly. I heard the clink of coins. How much should I contribute? Why had Dio given me the—grain? Most of all, who was he, how much did he know and what was his game?

Someone pushed me roughly from behind. I started to swing around and one of the flaps of my headdress swung across my face so that I was momentarily blinded. In that second of darkness I heard Falvi's familiar voice say, "Keep moving, will you?"

I turned my head back again toward the front, faster than I'd turned it toward Falvi. He was standing right behind me. I hurriedly moved forward, closing the gap between me and the next priest, heard Falvi's feet scuffle behind me.

Fine—wonderful! Of course it was a lucky break that I hadn't lost Falvi after all, that I could still depend on him to lead me to Lorna but my back felt singularly unprotected. I could feel rings being drawn concentrically on the back of my robe, with a bull's-eye just in the center, where a knife would be most effective. Inevitably I was moving closer to the splash of light by the cashier.

There were six priests ahead of me—five—four. I looked rigidly ahead, the coins clutched in my hot little palm. Automatically I noted the size and shape of the "grain" being tossed into the vase. Automatically I opened my hand and selected a coin that seemed identical. Then there were two men ahead of me—one—nobody at all.

I bent my head forward, so that the flaps fell forward too, and hoped my profile wouldn't be visible to Falvi. I dropped a coin in the vase. The cashier glanced at me sharply, ran his eyes down toward my legs—*my shoes and trousers!*

"Wait a bit!" he said, meeting my eyes again. "You're out of uniform." That wasn't his exact phrase but the meaning was identical.

And then Falvi yelled in my ear,

"Blast it, Vesto, keep your nose clean! I'm in a hurry! Step it up, step it up."

He shoved me through the gate and, as I hastily moved to one side, I heard a violent altercation begin between Vesto and Falvi. It ended in a perfect scream of rage from Falvi and the next thing I knew he was through the gate too and hurrying into the shadows.

Vesto appeared briefly and swore after him. I moved away in the opposite direction. When Vesto retreated I circled and began to trail Falvi, being doubly careful till we were both past the huge brightly-lit open square that faced the temple.

CHAPTER VI

Voice from the Heavens

IT'S no more difficult than a Chicago man suddenly finding himself in Bombay or Lhasa or Moscow, dressed in the appropriate local costume. But the

boy from State Street has seen newsreels of those places, he's read about them and he knows there are French and English in Bombay. And, anyway, there's not much basic difference between a rickshaw and a Dynaflow.

All the same he'll get a queer picture of Bombay, just as I did of this Malescan city. One reason was that I was afraid to try anything new that might unmask me by revealing my ignorance. A Martian might follow the crowds down a B.M.T. subway entrance and he'd get along fine till he ran up against the coin-operated turnstile. Then he'd start frantically wondering what peculiar ritual was required.

He might figure out how the change-booths worked but unless he had some U. S. currency, he'd be sunk. Even if he spoke English there'd still be trouble, since nobody in one of those New York subway change-booths has ever been known to speak in human tongues.

I certainly couldn't make much of the coins Dio had loaned me. I took them out and examined them as I went along. They all bore Roman numerals—I, II, V, XX—as well as puzzling symbols like those I had seen on the doors in the Temple. But none was of a recent enough mintage for me to make out details. They all had ornamental curlicues on the edges, like our own milled edges, so I guessed that Malesco had its coin-shavers too.

Malesco—oh, it was a rose-red city, all right, but some of the walls had graffiti scrawled on them—words my uncle hadn't listed in his vocabulary, though it was easy to figure some of them out—and the streets weren't especially clean.

The city wasn't crowded, though. I didn't see any throngs except once. A gang of people had got a man in gray coveralls backed up against a building and were yelling at him. That should have been my cue to spring to the victim's aid. He should have been the prince of some neighboring country and have been suitably grateful for my help.

But when an air-car swooped down and grounded gently not far away I hastily joined the crowd and yelled with them. Men in uniform were getting out of the air-car, which was built like a chariot, ornately decorated with scrolls and gilded curlicues.

The police dragged their victim away and, from what I overheard, I decided the "prince" was a pickpocket who'd been caught. So that was all right.

Falvi seemed to know where he was going. I never lost sight of that hurrying figure with its flapping headdress. I had a sense of immediate urgency for I remembered Dio very clearly. He knew who I was. Or did he?

I didn't form a complete picture of the city as I trailed Falvi. All I got were flashes, like the way a moving light slipped along one of the overhead causeways, the luminous jewelry some of the people wore, men and women both, and a flutter of confetti that blew past me down the street. One coil wrapped itself around my neck and as I pulled it free I saw lettering on the paper—COME TO THE BATH OF THE DIVINE WATER—it said in Malescan.

Well, that was what I meant to do if I could find the place.

A FEW aspects of the city stood out even above my preoccupation and the odd confused mingling of impressions you get in your first half hour in a strange place.

One was the curious attitude of the populace toward the priests. The first time a man stepped off the sidewalk into the gutter and bowed to me with a touch of masochistic abasement in the gesture I almost stopped in my tracks.

My first thought was that he'd seen through my disguise and was staging some elaborate joke before he hit me over the head and dragged me back to my doom. Then I saw he meant it. But what was expected of me in response I had no idea.

I looked ahead at Falvi. All I could see was the top of his head bobbing along in a straight hasty course. If this were happening to me, maybe it was happening to him too and he seemed to pay no attention. I took a chance and stalked haughtily by the bowing man. I didn't dare look back to see what his reaction was. Nothing happened, so that was all right too. And luckily not every person I passed felt quite that pious.

But they did get out of my way with respectful glances. I began after awhile to check on the expression they turned on me, trying to figure out what was going on. Most of them looked just respectful—stupid and awed. Some glowered but stood aside. Some gave me looks of sheer hatred.

Now and then somebody would all but throw himself at my feet in the same abject deference the first man had shown. Maybe it was consciousness of sin. Maybe these men had some guilt on their minds they thought I could read in their faces and were showing penitence by groveling in the gutter when I passed.

I didn't like it, and I didn't like the idea of a priesthood that would encourage such an attitude, but, after all, Malesco wasn't my responsibility. All I wanted was to get out of it, and take Lorna with me if I could find her.

I can't begin to tell you all the mystifying things I saw in that quick walk through the streets of Malesco. It wasn't like our cities. If it wasn't a place out of the Arabian Nights, neither was it the equivalent of New York and Chicago. There were shops, but their displays were mostly hidden and what I could see was arranged in ways that didn't make sense to me.

There were vehicles in the streets but they didn't make much sense either beyond the fact that they moved, carried passengers and seemed to obey traffic laws of a sort. Once in a while I saw moving lights in the sky and remembered the aircraft I'd already encountered.

There were no newspapers. You'd be surprised how you can miss commonplace things like that. Until you do miss them you don't realize what a big part newspapers play in normal city life. There was no litter of torn printed pages in the gutter, no noisy newsboys yelling on corners, no stands of magazines and dailies, nobody with a folded paper under his arm.

But what I did see, which as I later learned was the equivalent, was a long rack against buildings every few blocks which held on slanting shelves rows of big looseleaf paper volumes about the size of the average tabloid. Each rack had several people reading with their elbows on the shelf, turning the pages.

You paid a penny and read your daily news right out in public. I wished for time to stop and see what was new in Malesco myself but Falvi was moving fast ahead of me and there was no time to do more than steal a glance as I passed the stands, earning a look of resentment from the penny collector when I did so.

If I had known my rights as a priest I could simply have put one of the volumes under my arm and walked off and nobody would have dared to complain. But I didn't know that and I hadn't time then anyhow.

I went on after Falvi.

Strange things continued to happen all around me. I was getting used to the looks of awe, hatred or abject deference on the faces I passed but I had a lot of other things to get used to, too. For instance, a voice suddenly and urgently whispered in my ear, *"Listen!"*

I halted where I was. I looked around over my shoulder but there was no one near me. The only suspicious sight was a man in the priestly robe and headdress across the street, hurrying in the same direction that I was. But he was too far away to be the—

"Listen!" the whisper came again. "It's important! Your life may depend on it!"

For a second I dithered like a skeleton hung on wires. There just wasn't anyone near enough to me to whisper in my ear. And the whisper had a strange fading quality like a voice on the radio when you play with the dial.

"This is the secret," said the voice, brightening. "Drink Elixir, the refreshing tonic that makes you live longer." Then it broke into song. "Elixir, Elixir, Mother Ceres' fixer," it caroled and changed to a conspiratorial whisper again. "Listen! Listen! It's important—"

I cursed quietly and took up the trail again. Falvi was just turning a corner. I walked faster, occasionally running into a gust of auditory advertising that seemed to blow invisibly past me like confetti streamers. My first glimpse of Malesco, with the glamorous rose-red city gleaming in the sunset, hadn't prepared me for the uses of publicity as practised there.

I rounded the corner and there was Falvi, safely ahead. He hadn't once looked back. He was hurrying along the curving street, moving from dimness to brightness as light from shop-windows irregularly shone on him.

I remembered what I'd seen when I'd looked around a moment ago. I'd seen a priest on the opposite side of the street. It meant nothing, of course, but I couldn't help glancing around again. And there, turning the corner, was Dio.

HE was dodging a group of adolescents walking arm in arm across half the sidewalk and he didn't seem to see me looking back at him. He didn't seem to see the adolescents either except as objects to be avoided. I had a clear view of his face through the pedestrians, and I saw with unpleasant clarity the fierce anticipatory joy he was not even trying to conceal.

I spun back again, remembering Falvi, wondering how much of that anticipating triumph applied to Falvi and how much to me. The thin priest was just vanishing around a corner ahead and I hurried after him, feeling those concentric rings making a target of my back again. I knew Dio was behind me and I knew he meant me anything but good.

Yet what could I do about it? I couldn't lose him without losing Falvi and my only hope of reaching a potential friend. And yet I was leading Dio straight to Coriole. I couldn't get to Coriole at all unless I led Dio too.

And from what I'd overheard I suspected Coriole's safety depended on secrecy. Coriole discovered might be Coriole liquidated for all I knew. What good would he be to me liquidated? There didn't seem any way out of the noose I was running my neck into.

So we all trudged on through the rose-red city in our little game of follow-the-leader. I was busily turning over schemes for thwarting Dio, by-passing Falvi and joining forces with Coriole.

The smart thing would have been to warn Falvi about our mutual follower. No doubt he would have some resource at his fingertips for dealing with spies. I could catch up with him easily. I could tap him on the shoulder and say,

"L i s t e n! It's important! Drink Elix—" No, that was something else entirely. I felt a little drunk. I was not made of the indestructible stuff of heroes. Already I was getting tired, my head ached and I was wondering where my next meal would come from. If I warned Falvi of our mutual follower he could fix Dio easily enough. But first he'd fix me. To the two of us diligently led Dio directly toward Coriole.

After about three turns, Falvi hit a broad thoroughfare that led straight to a familiar sight. Now I could see a sign glowing in colored lights ahead of us that said—BATH OF THE DIVINE WATERS—in crawling Malescan letters and I knew I couldn't miss the place. You could see the Divine Water for miles. It was that huge globe of fiery liquid movement I had first glimpsed from my apartment, the rose-red globe that had formed a background for Lorna's fall into another world.

Lorna, I thought, Lorna Maxwell. It had to be Lorna I had got myself into Malesco to find—not a beautiful princess dripping with jewels. Not a lovely heiress from an old titled family whose life hung on my dashing accomplishments with sword and pistol. No, *I* was here to find Lorna Maxwell. It confirmed still further my uneasy suspicion that I was not the hero of this drama.

We were halfway down the thoroughfare to the Baths when a minor miracle happened. A chord of music sounded from nowhere, almost inaudible at first and then swelling upon the air until every other sound of the city was temporarily d r o w n e d out. Everybody stopped dead still in the streets. Everybody looked up.

I looked up too in time to see an expanding circle of light dawn like a ghostly sun upon a cloud straight overhead. It was full dark by now and there was no moon but the sky was full of stars, though I could see only the brightest of them because the city's illumination drowned out all the rest.

I was a little startled to see the Dipper, practically the only constellation I know. Things hadn't changed as much as I'd thought if the stars were still in their familiar places over Malesco.

Then a face began to take shape in the luminous sun that glowed upon the cloud. An enormous sigh breathed up from the city, almost inaudible, a breath from every man and woman of all these thousands around me in the streets. The face grew clearer. It took on familiar features.

Another few seconds and Lorna Maxwell was smiling down at me from the clouds, a vast luminous Lorna idealized like the poster I'd seen on the side of a building. She looked lovely. She looked tender and sweet. Her smile was exquisite. She just couldn't be Lorna Maxwell.

The smile faded slowly. This was no poster, it was a reflection on the cloud of the woman herself, whoever she was. The vast, shining blue eyes, each as large as a good-sized swimming pool,

beamed softly down upon Malesco. The music fell silent and the lovely lips on the cloud parted. Lorna's voice spoke to the breathless city.

It was Lorna, all right. The voice, like the face, was idealized almost out of all recognition but not quite. Just enough of the old Lorna's inflection and tonal qualities remained to make me sure I knew her. Down from the sky the gentle music of the voice floated softly.

"It is the hour for my withdrawal now," Lorna informed the city. "Now I go to my meditation and all of you, my faithful friends, go out to your evening's pastimes. Go with my blessing, Malescans. Remember your priests and their teachings.

"Drop your tithe without fail into the temple box when you pay your entrance fees tonight. Be virtuous, be happy. Ensure your reincarnation into higher callings by your conduct tonight and every night. I will await you in Paradise, my friends. I will await you in the sacred pathways of New York."

I heard a tremendous breath of murmured response all around me as the image began to fade. I couldn't believe what the words were that every man and woman within hearing said as Lorna grew dimmer upon the cloud. And yet I couldn't mistake it. What everyone in the city was murmuring in hushed devout accents was an echo of Lorna's last words.

"New York! New York!" all Malesco whispered and the light faded from overhead.

CHAPTER VII

Jimmerton

FALVI hurried up the broad steps under the dome of the Baths. The colored lights that said BATH OF THE DIVINE WATERS cast changing reflections on the street and shimmered in the glass of the change-maker's booth beside the entrance. I saw Falvi drop a coin in the glass bowl on the side of the booth and the man at the door clicked a turnstile and let him in.

In a daze I followed him up the steps, fumbling for the "grain" Dio had lent me. I felt both bewildered and heartened by what I had seen in the sky. It still made no sense but I felt much more important than I had fifteen minutes earlier.

It didn't add up, of course. One person fell through into Malesco from Earth and was given some sort of super-beauty treatment and enthroned as a goddess mouthing what I couldn't help regarding as rather chauvinistic gibberish from the clouds. Another person fell through —me—and was instantly set upon by priests and hounded like a criminal through the streets.

The New York angle of this very materialistic religion I wouldn't let myself think about. It was too entirely impossible. Later, maybe someone would explain it to me. Until then I couldn't allow myself to speculate. I would pretend it never happened. The sacred pathways of New York!

The effect of that vision on the clouds had been enormous. When it faded the city had buzzed with awed murmurings and even now the normal noises of crowds and traffic were not yet back to their previous volume. I overheard enough on the streets to realize that Lorna's visitation was accepted as something like a miracle. Nobody understood or attempted to understand how such a thing could be achieved mechanically.

This confused me still more. A city of the technological level that Malesco seemed to enjoy ought not to be rendered speechless with awe at the projection of a television image or the broadcasting of a human voice.

Naturally I didn't know how the priests had done the job. Maybe by drawing a pentagram and working black magic. But I knew how it *could* be done, so the only awe I felt was amazement at the change in Lorna.

Falvi vanished under the great arched entrance above me. He was certainly an inefficient conspirator. It seemed to me anybody who glanced at him would know without looking twice that here was a spy on the way to plot with a mastermind ringleader for the overthrow of the government.

The way he kept looking nervously over his shoulder was in itself a complete giveaway. He glanced again without seeing me—even that showed what a failure he was as a secret agent—and then disappeared into the building.

I wasn't any too sure of myself. My

trouser cuffs and shoes showing under the priestly robes made me nervous. If they'd been lit up with neons I couldn't have felt any more conspicuous. I was afraid of losing Falvi but I just didn't dare walk up to that booth and try to bluff my way in.

So I waited until a group of five or six men came along, just cheerful enough to be careless, and fell in behind them as they climbed the steps. One of the men threw several coins in the glass bowl beside the booth.

They started to file in through the turnstile and the man in the booth called something after them that I didn't hear very clearly. But the head man looked back, grinned sheepishly, then threw another coin into a box on the wall.

The temple box, I thought—the priestly jackpot that Lorna had plugged in her commercial from the clouds. I wondered wildly how much was due bowl and box. Then I remembered that Falvi hadn't contributed to the box. The flapping of my headdress against my cheek reminded me why. I was a priest too. We didn't have to contribute to our own support.

I tossed a coin at random into the glass bowl and shoved through the turnstile after the party ahead. Nobody stopped me. Nobody paid me any attention. I couldn't help looking back as I passed the turnstile and, sure enough, Dio was just starting up the steps from the street.

When I got into the vast rotunda inside Falvi was nowhere in sight. I had lost him.

It seemed unnecessarily ironic. I had managed to keep him in sight from the moment of my entrance into Malesco, only to lose him about five minutes short of Coriole. The big hall was full of people, all of them in the brightly colored tunics and short cloaks which the well-dressed man was wearing in Malesco that night. If there were women here they must have had a separate entrance. This crowd was exclusively male.

BECAUSE I had no alternative I let myself drift with them. The newcomers seemed to be making in a steady stream for a row of arches on the far side of the room. Hoping Falvi had gone that way too, I drifted with them. Under easier circumstances I'd have enjoyed the experience.

The big room was cool and pleasant. Music was floating through the air from some Malescan version of Muzak, colored lights made layers of rose and green and violet above us, sinking on what looked like drifts of fog in the air overhead.

Row upon row of balconies climbed the high dome of the rotunda and laughter and music and the clink of dishes and glasses drifted down from above. Now and then a slow shower of the advertising confetti sprinkled down through the air or streamers of coiling serpentine spiraled gently downward among the colored mists.

I wondered why my uncle had never told me about the Baths of the Divine Water. The outer shell of it I remembered from his bedtime tales. Maybe he had never been here. Maybe the Baths were new since his time, though the outer globe of shining fire was not.

Again I wondered, with consuming curiosity, just what had been his part in Malescan history, whether he'd really entered the place. It was rather like walking through Wonderland and looking for a handkerchief Alice had dropped seventy years ago or the print of her foot on the path through the woods where the Cheshire Cat sat waiting in a tree.

The Baths were enormous. I knew it was going to be hopeless to run across Falvi by accident or to find Coriole without being actually led up to him and introduced. All I could do was stroll with the crowd and try to ignore the occasional curious glance cast my way.

A streamer of purple paper wound round my face and commanded me to CALL FOR ALIETTE IN THE CRYSTAL GROTTO. I wondered if Aliette were a girl, a drink, a song or something completely Malescan and strange to me.

Beyond the arches was a long narrow hall which looked glamorous for a moment and then on second glance turned into a fairly commonplace locker room. The lockers were a wall of shining green stone checkered with white squares and instead of benches there were rows of individual padded stools. As I stood hesitating the crowd parted for a moment and there, halfway down the room, I saw a familiar flapped headdress and Falvi's anxious thin nose in profile.

It seemed too good to be true for a moment. Then common sense took over

and I realized that if everyone who entered came first to the locker room it was no miracle that I had found Falvi.

I edged down the room toward him. He was sitting on a padded stool, one ankle crossed over his knee, working on the lacings of a calf-high boot, and he was talking earnestly to the man on the next stool. The man wore nothing but an orange towel knotted around his waist.

But he was clothed permanently in a head-to-foot garment of freckles that patterned every inch of his skin as if he had been tattooed with them. He had characteristic stiff reddish hair, cut in a sort of brush on top of his head, and the orange towel looked hideous on him.

The freckled man laughed, a thin giggle that struck a responsive chord in my mind. Coriole! But I couldn't get near enough to eavesdrop without some better disguise than a priest's robe and headdress. Falvi would know me.

What better disguise, I realized suddenly, than nothing at all? Clothes make the Malescan but nakedness in a public bath ought to break down all barriers of fashion. Without my clothing I would be as good a Malescan as anybody so long as I kept my mouth shut.

I watched what the others were doing, found out and walked along till I located an empty locker. There was a three-inch square of white on the front of it, a blank square. I pushed my thumb against it and the locker slid open. When I took my thumb away, there was a black indentation of whorls and lines left on the white square.

I stripped in a hurry, having a little difficulty because I wanted to keep my robe on till last. If anyone noticed my garments weren't Malescan, I suppose my entirely fallacious air of self-assurance got me over that hump. Stripped, I stopped feeling conspicuous.

There was a large sheet of toweling hanging in the locker and, following the precedent I saw around me, I draped myself in the thing before I pushed the locker door shut and heard it click briskly into place. I realized that only my thumb, pressed into the indented print, would unlock it again. My towel was blue, a more fortunate color than Coriole had drawn.

WHEN I looked again for Falvi I saw him just putting his headdress into the locker. There was a purple towel around his thin shoulders and his thin shanks were meager beneath its lower edge. He was alone.

In momentary panic I looked around the room, finally spotting an orange towel and a freckled back receding down the hall toward an archway at the end through which steam drifted fragrantly now and then. My job, I realized, was to get to Coriole now and introduce myself before Falvi could intervene.

Falvi was perfectly capable of doing something disastrous to us both out of sheer nervous inefficiency if he recognized me. For all I knew he had some deadly weapon hidden in his locker or carried in a fold of the purple towel. Why he was so anxious to kill me I wasn't quite sure but the fact that he was seemed evident. It was not mine just then to question why.

I was about to follow Coriole and trust to luck when from the corner of my eye I caught a flash of striped and flapping headdress near the entrance by which I had come, Dio stood there, boldly surveying the hall. I turned my back hastily, thanking heaven for my protective coloration in this hall of nakedness and colored towels.

Dio would not, I thought, know me unless I were careless but I was fairly sure he would know Falvi. And then a flash of brilliant wisdom shot through my head and I conceived the perfect scheme for getting rid of both Dio and Falvi.

Barefooted, I pattered down the warm tiled floor after Falvi, who was now making for the far archway. I caught up with him about where I'd intended, beyond that misty threshold. The room beyond might have been any size, for it was filled with a dry tingling kind of steam or smoke, hot and perhaps electrically charged. My hair stirred a little and a vibration ran along my skin.

Shapes moved dimly in that curtained dimness. Falvi had blurred to a skinny shadow and I walked faster, timing myself carefully. I had to say something to him but I didn't want to give him time enough to recognize my face.

Just behind him, I hissed in his ear, "Listen! It's important! Your life may depend on it!"

He kept right on walking. As I'd hoped he was thoroughly conditioned to Malescan commercials.

I spotted a group of shadows near me and just before I drifted toward them I

whispered, "Dio's following you, Falvi!"

He did a double-take. It wasn't what he'd been expecting to hear. Probably his mind assumed for a second or two that he was being ordered to drink Elixir. Then he snapped to a halt and turned round wildly.

But by then I was safely concealed among that shadowy group of Malescans. I could see Falvi, though not clearly, but he couldn't see me because he didn't know where to look. In that dim room one figure was exactly like another.

I saw the vague shape that was Falvi hesitate, take a few steps in one direction, pause again. Then the priest made an indistinct gesture with his arms and plunged away, back toward the locker room. I drifted in that direction but I didn't leave the concealment of the dry steam. There was no sign of Dio but Falvi was getting dressed again with furious haste.

I retreated into the mist. I started looking for Coriole. There are few red-haired freckled men in any single social group. At least, I found only one in the series of interlocking steam-rooms here —and that one, of course, was Coriole.

I located him after a rather nightmarish sequence in which I floated in ghostly fashion through what gradually became an Elysian Fields, peopled with apparitions. I was considering following Ulysses' example and opening a vein in my arm to attract the ghosts when I unexpectedly saw a pair of freckled legs, covered with red hair, floating in the fog, the soles of two feet staring up at me with an odd air of blank expectancy.

Luckily the air was thicker than ever here. All I could see was Coriole's legs but the rest of him was presumably reclining on a couch. I clutched the towel around me and dithered slightly for a bit. Now that I'd found the man, I didn't know what came next.

I was going on a very tenuous assumption after all. Maybe it would be better to feel him out a little before I gave myself away. I saw the dim outlines of an empty couch beside Coriole's and I sat down on it tentatively. It had a firmly yielding surface, slick and warm. I sat staring at Coriole's dim outlines, revolving opening lines in my mind and discarding them. There was a long pause. Then Coriole stirred.

"Falvi?" he asked. "Is that you?"

It was all the cue I needed. I tried to remember what little I heard of Falvi's intonation. I pitched my voice to the front of my mouth, spoke thinly and a little through my nose like Falvi and ventured one brief word.

"Yes."

Then I held my breath. Apparently it worked for Coriole rolled over to face me and said, "Lie down then. Relax and tell me what happened."

Willingly I lay down because it hid my face better. However, my scheme was not to do the talking but to get Coriole started. I said experimentally, "Well—"

SOMEBODY blundered past us in the steam. Coriole laughed the already familiar thin chuckle and said loudly,

"Did you hear the story about Blandus? He was complimented on his stable and he said it was because his horses ate such fine pargani. Even the Hierarch didn't get anything better. The joke was, of course, that it's exactly what *did* happen on Tuesdays!"

I forced a polite laugh. The blunderer stubbed his toe, swore and receded. Coriole, an orange-shrouded ghost in the steam, got up and nudged me.

"There's an empty clear-room at the end of the row," he said. "This is too public. Come on."

I made a great effort to put myself in Falvi's mental shoes and said in Falvi's voice as we stumbled through the dimness,

"Coriole, what am I going to do?" I put some of Falvi's panic into the query.

"Do what Dom Corbi did," Coriole said with dreadful joviality. "Call it a *nolli secundo* and the second race won't be run today."

I was silent, wondering just how well I really understood Malescan.

"The first thing I want you to do," my guide said in a lower voice, "is to find that man from New York. The second thing is to stop playing with fire. You had no business fiddling with the Earth-Gates and you ought to know it by now. For a man as timid as you, Falvi, you do run the most terrible risks."

"I meant to kill him," I said, remembering Falvi's defense on the communicating waffle I had watched him use.

"I know you did. I'm inclined to have *you* killed if you do. Fortunately for me

he did get away. The next thing's to find him."

"Why?" I asked.

"He needs me and I need him," Coriole said illuminatingly, taking me by the arm. He paused for a moment. Then he said, "Here's the passage. Look out!" He stumbled heavily and fell against me, gasping an apology as we both reeled.

"Sorry," I said mechanically as I regained my balance.

Coriole stood perfectly still in the mist. He did not speak and he did not move. I couldn't even hear him breathing. There was something terrifying about that sudden immobility. I didn't understand it for a long moment. Then it came to me. I heard the echo of my own apology still hanging in the air, and it was not in Malescan I had spoken.

I had spoken English.

Coriole laughed very softly. My mind went blank with dismay. Why had I done it? The answer was slow in coming but when I realized what it was I felt my jaw drop and I gaped stupidly at the dim outlines of my companion. I'd had a good reason for speaking in English, after all. Coriole had spoken in English too. When he said "Look out!" he'd said exactly that, not *"Se-garde,"* which is the Malescan equivalent.

Coriole was still laughing, still almost silently. Now he said, "Name of Burton, by any chance?" and this time he spoke Malescan again.

There wasn't any use in trying to keep up the game any longer. I said, "That's good. How did you know?"

"Falvi's talked to Clia. And not all the priests idolize Hierarch."

"Do I know Clia?"

"You knew her as Lorna Maxwell."

"Oh," I said. "Did—who taught you English? Falvi?"

"No, my father taught me that. I don't know much of it—he went away when I was only ten. Here, come on in where we can look at each other."

He groped forward, guiding me by the arm.

"My Falvi wasn't so good, eh?" I inquired, rather hurt, as I followed him.

"On the contrary, my friend. You took me in until I touched your arm." He slapped me gently on the shoulder. "If you'd ever taken Falvi by the arm you'd know the difference. Falvi worries too much. Your arm would make two of his. I didn't *know* you weren't a spy from the Hierarch, of course, but I had a strong conviction and it's proved itself. Here we are. Come along."

The room was small. Coriole shut the door behind us and locked it while I glanced at the furnishings of the place. There was no fog here though the air tingled as it had done outside. There were two low couches with the same slick warmish padding on them.

There was a table between them and above it on the wall a large blank screen with dials set in a row across the bottom, each stamped in gilt with Roman numerals. I think I realized then for the first time that I hadn't seen Arabic numbers anywhere in Malesco, only the angular and to me confusing Roman numerals.

Then I turned around and saw Coriole's face. For a second or so the bottom dropped out of my stomach and I could only stare. After awhile I heard myself murmuring tentatively, "Uncle Jim? Uncle Jim?"

Coriole grinned blankly at me. He didn't understand. And of course he wasn't really Uncle Jim. But the likeness was so strong it couldn't be coincidence. Most red-headed men with freckles look alike—it's a familiar mold of countenance that seldom varies much. But this was a closer likeness than you could explain that way.

Coriole had the same long-jawed, raw-boned face, the same heavy freckling, the same pale blue eyes, the same bristle of red hair growing to the same line on the forehead. He was younger than I by a few years, I thought. I counted back rapidly and the idea that struck me then has probably been obvious for some time now in this narrative. But at the moment it rocked me back on my heels.

"What was your father's name?" I demanded.

"Jimmerton," he said promptly. "He came from Paradise."

I sat down heavily on the nearer couch. "His name," I said, "was Jim Burton and he came from New York."

"I *said* he came from Paradise," Coriole nodded agreeably. "Jim Burton? *Burton?* But you—"

"That's right," I said numbly. "He was my uncle."

CORIOLE sat down heavily too and we stared at each other in silence. After awhile he shook his head dubi-

ously. He had more reason than I for doubts. After all, I had the likeness to go on and Uncle Jim's tales. Coriole had nothing but my word. I offered what facts I could.

"Jim Burton looked just like you. He disappeared about thirty years ago and was gone for ten years. When he came back he lived with us for awhile, quite a few years, in fact. He taught me Malescan, when I was a kid. How else could I be speaking it?

"He never had much to say about where he'd been, but he was ill for a long time and I think he'd had a lot of trouble during the time he'd been away. He died three years ago. He left me his apartment. That was how—"

"Of course!" Coriole said suddenly. "Jimmerton came through the Earth-Gates from his own library in New York. I remember that much. It was how you came too and Clia. What a fool I am! I never connected her with Jimmerton at all. She didn't know the name and I supposed the entry between the worlds—the nexus—had shifted since my father's day. But it didn't! And you—we're cousins, aren't we?"

"I guess so," I agreed, looking at him in a dazed way. Malesco was real, of course. I couldn't doubt that anymore. But somehow this finding of relatives in the place brought it a lot closer than I'd been able to realize before. It was like finding cousins in Graustark or through the looking-glass. Coriole was staring at me with the same dazed wonder.

"Think of that!" he murmured, scanning my face. "*Think* of it! A cousin from Paradise!"

"Look," I said firmly, "let's get this straight right now. What makes you people think New York is Paradise? Believe me, I know better!"

Coriole grinned crookedly. He glanced at the locked door.

"Yes, I know better too. But if anybody else hears you saying so you'll find your head off your shoulders before you finish speaking. The Hierarch doesn't encourage heresy, you know."

I leaned back on the couch, settled the blue towel comfortably around me, and crossed my legs. "I don't know anything," I said. "You've got a long session of explaining before you. But first—I'm hungry. Have I got enough money here to buy myself a meal?"

I held out the handful of coins Dio had given me. Coriole smiled and punched a button in the wall without rising.

"Refreshments go with the admission fee," he said. "I want to know a few things, too, such as where you got that grain and how you found your way here to start with. I ought to warn you—" He gave me a pale blue stare, quite coldly.

"I'm not taking you entirely at your word. I think you're telling me the truth but if you are you can't prove it. You fooled me back there in the steam-hall into saying enough to hang me if you're a spy, so I've got to go on the assumption you aren't. We'll pretend we believe each other, shall we?"

"Play it from there," I said. "Maybe something will come out that will convince you. I can't blame you for suspecting the worst, I suppose. My speaking the language ought to be the best convincer I can offer."

"It is. I'll admit that had me puzzled for a moment. But—"

A tap at the door interrupted him. He gave me a wary glance.

"You answer it," he said.

"I can't work the lock."

He reached out to slip the handle of the door sidewise, then sank back. I opened the door. Fog drifted in. There was a man in pink shorts outside, pushing a three-tiered cart that jingled.

"Refreshments, sir," he said. "You rang?"

"Oh yes," I said and accepted the tray he handed me. Coriole silently shut and locked the door as I set down the tray.

There was a basket of rolls that looked very much like the bread I was accustomed to. There was a dish of boiled eggs differing from Earthly eggs only in the bluish pattern on the shells. There was a pot of cheese and a pot of something steaming that smelled like tea and a big bowl of some chopped-up stuff that smelled pungent.

There was a tray of apples, peaches, some bunches of bright red grapes and two other fruits I didn't recognize. It was not what I'd have ordered but it looked good and I was hungry. We helped ourselves, munching away from opposite couches, glancing warily at each other from time to time, talking as we ate.

And I found out at last under what circumstances New York could be Paradise.

CHAPTER VIII

The Alchemic Version

BEFORE the wall opened to pitch me through into another world Malesco had in my mind been one with Graustark, Ruritania, Oz, Islandia, Gormenghast, Erewhon, the Utopias of Plato, Aristotle and Sir Thomas More, all the other imaginary worlds I had assumed existed only in human minds. Now—I wonder.

It may be that every one of them is as real as Malesco or only a little less real, in the plane of what Coriole called the *mundi mutabili*. He also referred to the same theory under the name of *orbis inconstans* and *probabilitas-universitas-rerum*. But with Malescans it was no theory—it was fact.

I'd read enough about the alternative futures theory to understand him without much trouble, though he took it for granted that I knew somewhat more than I did. I had to pull him up now and then and get a fuller explanation. But briefly, this is what happened at the point of split-off between Earth and Malesco, away back in the Claudian times of first-century Rome.

Up to the end of the reign of Caligula there was no Malesco. As a world it had never existed, never even been thought of. Our past and its were identical. But when Caligula died something definitive happened and there was a split between Malesco and Earth. Instead of Claudius a man named Rufus Agricola mounted the Roman throne. After that men with unfamiliar names ruled Rome until it fell to the barbarian invaders and its own inept policies.

In our world a religion which Caligula had persecuted spread until it controlled all of Europe. In Malesco a religion Caligula had encouraged spread instead like wildfire until it submerged every other faith. It was an extremely practical religion, originating in Egypt, and it had ruled all Malesco ever since until the present day.

Its name was Alchemy.

Alchemy had made a utopia of Malesco and there is nothing worse than a utopia, though very few people seem to realize it. Only in Butler's Erewhon and Huxley's Brave New World is it suggested that the standard utopia can be a version of hell itself.

For in most utopias it's taken as a matter of course that the stability of the community is the goal of mankind. Private happiness is unimportant, rigid caste systems are enforced and total paralysis of society is the prime condition without which the utopia wouldn't last half an hour.

Maybe Alchemy's coming out of Egypt had some connection with what happened to Malesco because Egypt for two thousand years was the most rigid "utopia" in history. Like Egypt Malesco reached a peak of growth early in its career. And like Egypt its priesthood got so firm a hold upon the government that though all growth ceased long before, the society continued in a sort of deathless rigor mortis far beyond the normal life-span of a civilization.

Malesco for the past five hundred years had stood dead still, a society frozen into stasis and operated solely for the benefit of the priesthood and that of whatever conqueror briefly seized control. The priests let the tides of rebellion wash over the country, carry a conqueror to a throne and maintain him there until somebody else pushed him off—but it was the priests who manipulated all the wires and collected all the benefits.

There was conflict between church and state, of course—but in Malesco the powers of science were with the church, for Alchemy was based on practical science. In Malesco Galileo would have been a priest, not a heretic. Gunpowder once conquered vast countries. In Malesco, only priests of Alchemy could possibly have discovered the uses of gunpowder; the only textbooks on chemistry were in the temples.

As in Egypt, for a long, long time there was no promise of relief even in the hereafter for the hoi polloi. Only the priests and the kings could expect to survive and enjoy the benefits of heaven.

About three hundred years ago, while in our world America was being colonized and Shakespeare was getting drunk at the Mermaid Tavern and Eastern Europe was falling piece by piece into the hands of the Turks, Malesco had a world-wide revolution. The priests for the first time found themselves face to face with a real problem.

Malesco is a smaller world than ours. A lot of it is ocean and a lot more unexplored wilderness. But on every inhabitated continent there were tremendous waves of terrorism as the common man got mad enough to let himself go. They weren't very wise or intelligent men because they'd never been allowed to be.

They had no more knowledge of self-control than so many angry children because they'd never been trusted with self-control. When they ran wild they instituted a reign of terror over all Malesco, taking out their anger and frustration on each other when no priests were handy.

It was just what you'd expect—look at the French revolution—and it made a very ugly blot in Malescan history. The blame was all the priests' and they easily managed to shift it right back on the revolutionists.

AND the priests, as usual, found a clever way to pacify the people and still get their own way. The same thing happened in Egypt. A profound social revolution was neatly transferred to the plane of religion and solved there without making a ripple in the course of real human living. If it hadn't actually happened in Egypt you'd find it hard to believe it could happen anywhere outside the pages of romance.

The priests simply promised the people that if they would be good and go home they could look forward to seeing Paradise too some day after they were dead. It worked. The Egyptians accepted the Osiris cult without a murmur and went on building pyramids. The Malescans went right on under the heavy yoke of the Alchemic priesthood and accepted the promise of New York as their future Paradise.

At that point in the story I choked over my supper and Coriole had to pound me on the back. He also showed symptoms of telling me another joke which my contretemps reminded him of but I shut him off quickly.

"Go on," I urged. "I want to hear more about Paradise."

Coriole went back to the egg he'd been eating. The blue patterns on the shell gave it a festive Easter-egg look and apparently the shell was edible too. He was crunching it between his teeth in a way that gave me gooseflesh.

"You're sure," he inquired, crunching, "that nobody in your world knows about Malesco? Because from the very first we've known about Earth. The split wasn't very sharp at first. The priests, the clairvoyants and oracles and people like that made contact very easily.

"We figured out about what had happened long ago. From then on the priests kept telling us that Earth had taken the right path and we'd taken the wrong one and were going to be punished for our sins."

He dipped the egg in sugar and tossed what remained of it in his mouth with a flourish.

"The letter A," he said, "is the symbol of the *mundi mutabili*, the variable worlds. You've noticed it in the city, I expect. The priests make an A with their fingers and thumbs when they talk about New York. The apex of the letter represents the point where Malesco and Earth divided.

"The two shanks are the separate, diverging paths as the worlds draw apart. The crossbar, of course, represents the bridge by which the virtuous go to their reward in Paradise. It's also the bridge by which you and Clia and Jimmerton came to Malesco."

He grinned at me suddenly. "Would you like to see Paradise?" he asked.

"I would."

Coriole got up, shaking crumbs from his orange towel and fiddled with one of the gilt-numbered dials under the screen.

A large glowing A dawned slowly on the wall. Then it faded, music swelled impressively in the little room and a priest's voice began to chant some solemn words I couldn't understand very well. I imagine it was archaic Malescan but I caught the name of New York repeated several times.

Then the clouds which had been rolling luminously over the screen cleared and a shining city took place. I leaned forward. We were looking down at an angle from several thousand feet up and, sure enough, we were looking at New York.

I could see the Battery and the fringe of wharves lying out in the rivers all around the lower edges of the city. I could see Central Park making a flat rectangle of green in the distance and the tall midtown buildings stuck up like monoliths above the patterned streets.

I could even see the angle Broadway makes out of the welter of the Village

and down at the tip of the island a magnificent cluster of dazzling white skyscrapers shot out continuous streamers of gold light.

It seemed a little odd that the Eiffel Tower should be standing in the vicinity of Chatham Square and something like the Pyramid of Cheops cast a huge triangular shadow across the approaches to the Brooklyn Bridge but otherwise the city was unmistakable.

"I don't seem to remember," I told my cousin dubiously, "that the City Hall has a halo like that. And the Empire State isn't really gold-plated, you know. And—"

"I believe you," Coriole said. "This isn't a real reflection of New York. It's something the priests worked up for public release."

"But how did the Eiffel Tower get there?" I asked. "That's in Paris."

"Don't quibble. It's sacrilege to question the Alchemic version of Paradise."

"As a matter of fact," I said, eyeing the streets of Paradise with fascinated attention, "I've been wondering why they picked New York at all. It's such a young city, historically speaking. Why, three hundred years ago when you had your uprising it wasn't even called New York."

"Oh, Paradise used to be London," Coriole explained. "Then there was a shake-up in the priesthood and after that all the best people went to New York when they died. Only the priests are reincarnated in Paradise, you know. Did I tell you that?

"Reincarnation is the keystone of the religion. You've got to work your way up by virtuous living until you get reborn a priest. When a priest dies—*flash!*—he finds himself driving up Fifth Avenue in a golden chariot drawn by dragons. It's a fact!"

I LOOKED at him narrowly, wondering if this were another of his terrible jokes.

"You'd like to see it?" he asked, leaning toward the screen.

"No, no, I don't think I could stand that," I told him hastily.

"All right," Coriole said. He paused and his grin faded. "It's funny when you look at it objectively like this," he went on, "but it's tragic when you consider how many generations have lived and died in what amounts to slavery, with no more reward than the prospect of an impossible afterlife like that to keep them quiet. In one way maybe the Alchemists are right, though. Earth can't have gone any farther astray than we. Perhaps theirs was the better course after all."

"I doubt it," I said. "The Industrial Age was bad enough but the Atomic Age looks pretty grim too, from where I sit." It reminded me of something. "What about industrialism in Malesco?" I asked. "You've got a mechanistic civilization but the people seem to take some perfectly obvious gimmicks awfully seriously. That projection of Lorna on the clouds, for instance—"

"You know how it was done?" Coriole leaned forward suddenly, his pale blue eyes shining. "Do you *know?*"

"I know one way. There may be others."

"Then it was no miracle?"

I snorted. Coriole's freckled face wreathed itself in smiles.

"We need you, cousin," he said. "The priesthood has controlled all the devices

[*Turn page*]

for what you call 'mechanistic society' ever since they began to appear. These things are officially known as miracles. Everything a man can't do with his own bare hands or tools he can make himself out of raw materials is classed as a miracle.

"If you punch a button and a hidden bell rings that's a miracle. This screen that brings pictures out of the air is a miracle. Nobody but an Alchemist is allowed to question how they work. You see?"

I sat back and tried to picture life in New York operating by miraculous subway, miraculous taxis, miraculous electric power. I couldn't do it.

"And the people put up with that?" I asked incredulously.

Coriole shrugged.

"People put up with a lot," he said. "Now and then they stage a revolution and thrones change hands but it never shakes the hold the priests have. That revolt three hundred years ago came nearest to it and you know what happened then.

"The people have been trained to be fools for too long to outwit the priesthood. About a generation ago, though, something did happen that had the Hierarch worried for awhile." He paused and looked at me quizzically.

"What happened?"

"My father came to Malesco," Coriole said. "He must have been a great man, Jimmerton. I wish I'd known him better."

I looked at him in silence, thinking of the red-headed boy who had been growing up in Malesco all the while I was growing up in Colorado, each of us learning the language and customs of Malesco and cherishing the memories we had of Jim Burton, who had vanished out of both our lives.

"Go on," I said. "What happened?"

"He came through from Earth during one of the Equinoctial Ceremonies. Stepped right through the Earth-Gates into the Temple while the Hierarch was chanting about New York. The people were all worked up to a great pitch of emotion and they were ready to accept Jimmerton as a god from another world.

"If the Hierarch had had any sense he'd have let them do it. But he began yelling about red-haired devils and the priests dragged Jimmerton off to jail."

Coriole loked wistful. "Those were the days," he said. "I wish I'd been alive then. I wish somebody'd been ready to grab the opportunity when it came. The people of Malesco were wild. They'd have risen against the Alchemists in one mass if they'd had any leadership at all. But they didn't.

"There were people among the jailors who weren't afraid of the consequences, though. My grandfather was one of them. So was my mother. They smuggled Jimmerton out and took him to one of the East Bay villages and people made pilgrimages to see him. Oh, those were great days!

"The priests couldn't keep the news quiet. And they couldn't catch Jimmerton, either. They tried hard. They tried for ten years. Jimmerton lived in the mountains and organized his followers for an all-out attack on the Alchemists. They say he never slept twice in the same place for months at a time.

"My mother traveled with him and helped with the organization and training. I was born in a fishing boat on the Gonwy within sight of the Alchemists' campfires at the height of a campaign against the revolutionaries."

HE PAUSED again, his face darkening with introspection in the way I'd seen Uncle Jim's face darken so many times when he sat silent, thinking about things I couldn't imagine. Now I knew. And this time I realized that all my wild fancies about the hero from Earth battling against fearful odds were not so wild and fanciful after all.

I'd just got at them from the wrong end. Things like that do happen, in just the way Coriole was recounting. You don't often find the dashing hero with the muscles of a giant, swinging a six-foot sword against overwhelming odds while the heroine quails lushly in the background, inspiring him to superhuman efforts. That much was phony.

But entirely unromantic-looking men like Jim Burton actually do find themselves in desperate situations sometimes and engage in pure melodrama to escape. I was glad the heroine had been a brave and intelligent woman who didn't waste her time quailing in corners. I didn't think Uncle Jim had indulged in any fake heroics, either.

Our own segment of current history is full of tales like his, men who lead guerrilla warfare against intolerable sit-

uations and strike no dramatic poses while they're doing it. I couldn't imagine Uncle Jim striking poses.

"What happened then?" I asked again.

"Oh, Jimmerton was defeated, of course," Coriole said, and sighed. "What did you suppose? They caught up with him finally. I was just old enough to remember him afterward. He and my mother were resting in a mountain village after a long campaign. I was having a nap that afternoon under a tree by a spring behind the house. I remember it very well, really."

He sighed again.

"There was a miracle," he said bitterly. "The whole village—well, no use going into all that. The real miracle was that both Jimmerton and I did escape. But he never knew about me. I was badly burned and buried under a sort of avalanche the explosion started.

"An old shepherd dug me out and brought me back to life three days after I was buried. When I could ask questions again I learned Jimmerton had gone back to Paradise. What really happened, do you know?"

I shook my head. "He never talked about it. He taught me Malescan and told me a little about the city, how it looked, what the people were like—not much. He was ill for a long time, you know. Maybe he was injured in the—miracle."

"I suppose he was. My mother was killed and of course he thought I was dead too. He must have given up after that. If he'd come back—" Coriole was silent awhile.

THEN he said heavily, "Well, maybe I'll finish the job he started. Maybe you and I together can do it. What do you say, Burton?"

I blinked at him stupidly. "How do you mean?"

He made an impatient gesture. His pale eyes were cold and eager.

"You know the things we need to know. You're from Paradise too but you're not a puppet like Clia. You could teach us—"

"I'm an actor, Coriole," I said firmly. "That's all—just an actor. I don't know how to whip up an atom-smasher out of an old washtub and a jury-rigged cigarette lighter. There's nothing I could teach you."

"You can count, can't you?" he demanded in a sort of desperation. "You know the Arabic numerals through zero, don't you?"

I nodded mutely, staring at him.

"I don't," he said. "I can't. We aren't allowed to use Arabic numerals. It's a treasonable offence to learn them. All we have are Roman numerals and you can't work out anything but the simplest types of problems with that clumsy system. Do you have any idea what that means?"

I did, dimly. I nodded again, remembering what I'd read about the invention of zero and all the mathematical intricacies it had led to. With the old numerals multiplication and division themselves had been tremendous undertakings.

With Arabic numerals the man in the street could learn arithmetical tricks only Roman scholars could perform and that laboriously.

"I see what you mean," I said. "I don't know much about modern technology but I do know how closely the development of physics, for instance, ties in with mathematics. I can see your problem. Those Alchemists are pretty smart boys."

"I've got a good organization now," Coriole said, still with the strange cold eagerness that rather repelled me. "Here's the set-up. I won't go into details but I got in touch with a lot of Jimmerton's old lieutenants and we learned by his mistakes.

"We've got to strike at the heart of the Alchemists—at the Hierarch himself. We can't win by nagging at the outskirts, the way Jimmerton had to. I've got men in key positions everywhere. Like Falvi, you know. He's one of the top men in Alchemy."

I nodded dubiously. For my money Falvi was a broken reed so far as conspiracy went. But it wasn't for me to say so.

"The people are with us," Coriole went on, his cold violence making every word crackle. "Clia's coming was a setback. For a while we hoped we could use her but the priests got there first. They're terribly cunning. They never miss a bet. And they'd learned their lesson when Jimmerton came through."

"What happened?" I asked yet again. "With Lorna—Clia?"

"I'll show you," Coriole said, reaching for another gilt dial below the screen.

CHAPTER IX

Clia, the Key

AGAIN the golden A began to glow slowly before us. The voice chanted again in the same archaic Malescan I couldn't follow. After a moment or two fog began to roll across the screen and music swelled majestically.

The music sank and an echoing hum and buzz of voices replaced it. We were looking down a long room, enormous, crowded with men and women, at a high dais at the far end. It was the voices of the people that hummed above the music.

"That's the Alchemic Temple," Coriole said.

It was a vast room and, curiously, you could see very little of it. The upper walls and all the ceiling were hidden by rolling fog, no doubt accepted by the congregation as a minor miracle though it was obvious that concealed pipes must be puffing it out at intervals. You could even see the disturbances in the clouds now and then where fresh fog came in.

It gave an air of tremendous mystery to the temple. Through the shifting veils of it you could catch a glimpse of the walls once in awhile and the great colored and gilded images on them. There were stylized animals, lions in red, green and yellow. There were black eagles, red eagles, salamanders in gold, all the planets labeled in luminous characters.

I had a vague memory of the alchemic symbolisms and knew that these figures represented chemical terms. But to the people they obviously represented only mysterious secrets of the priesthood. The people were watching the dais.

On the wall at its back there was a vast round window looking out over the city. I saw the great globe of water with the fiery fountains playing around it, the roofs and streets beyond. It was the same view of Malesco I had first glimpsed through the shimmering air in my apartment. I watched with great interest.

"This is part of the usual Equinoctial Ceremony," Coriole said, reaching for another egg. "They give us a glimpse of Paradise and a lecture about how to get there. Only this time, something went wrong. Watch."

On the dais a great deal of ceremonial arm-waving was going on. Enormous coiled horns were being blown with solemn hootings, priests in brilliant robes did some kind of a trudging little dance before the window and the glass in it began to cloud. Then right down the middle the cloud quivered and opened like a cat's pupil dilating—and there was New York.

The horns blatted triumph. The people gave one enormous emotional sigh. The priests sang out all together on a single sustained note and then let it quaver down the scale to silence. We all looked at Paradise.

This was the real thing. There was no Eiffel Tower or Great Pyramid in this New York. The camera appeared to be moving rapidly up Fifth Avenue from a considerable height. It was a foggy evening in Manhattan and the lights of the city shimmered and twinkled spectacularly.

On the far side of the Park the diamond-studded apartment house peaks floated on a sea of mist with black treetops silhouetted against its base. I felt impressed and strangely homesick. I could see what a conviction of Paradise a sight like that might give people who didn't know New York.

The vision floated swiftly away beneath us. Traffic made streaks of bright gold through the fog—sainted priests, no doubt, driving fiery dragons along Fifth Avenue. I could see what they meant.

"This is only visual, you know," Coriole was explaining at my elbow, crunching blue eggshell between his teeth as he talked. "They thought it was perfectly safe. They didn't know about the flaw Jimmerton came through. Look now—they're going to strike it in a minute. There! You see?"

New York reeled dizzily sidewise in the temple screen. It was an immensely unsettling feeling. The whole congregation screamed and appeared to stagger. The horns gave a series of disorganized hoots.

Fifth Avenue soared straightup the sky and turned upside down and the priests in Paradise could be seen calmly driving their dragons across the firmament. Then the whole city blurred like rain on a window and there was an uncanny moment when I could hear Lorna's voice, very thin and small.

"Eddie, look at me! Eddie!"

Then far away I heard my own voice, growling at her. It was a shocking moment of *déja vu.* Shadows whirled in the screen. It must have been a quick glimpse straight into my apartment and my own past but it happened too fast to mean anything from this angle.

A scream welled out of the spinning shadows, a scream that began thin and distant and swelled like a siren wailing. It was the same scream I had heard diminishing into nothing from the other side as Lorna fell through the gap between worlds and vanished from Earth.

THE shadows seethed. Then very clearly I saw Lorna's face, distorted with terror, spin quite slowly and vanish behind a screen of her swirling hair. There was a high vibrant note like music that made the eardrums ache. Lorna tumbled out of the chaos on the screen and sprawled on the dais face down, her hair fanning across the gilded floor.

"Look!" Coriole said quickly. "Watch —everything will flicker for a second. There—see that? It's where the priests cut out a bit from the records. You know why? Can you guess? Because every man and woman in the congregation breathed one word when they saw the figure come through. *Jimmerton!*" He sighed.

"I wish they'd tried to arrest her and get rid of her. Things would have been easy for us then. But the Hierarch was too smart for us. That's the Hierarch, in the gold robes—the fat man. Watch."

A broad, squat figure built like Friar Tuck or Santa Claus without the beard trundled importantly forward and bent above Lorna. Then he turned and raised both arms toward the people. The rising murmur of the congregation had a note of menace in it, I thought, but they quieted to hear what he would say.

"An angel has come down to us from Paradise," the Hierarch announced importantly in a voice so amplified that I felt sure he had a mike concealed in his golden bib somehow.

Lorna lay quiet on the dais. I could see now that she must have struck her head against something when she fell. It wasn't like Lorna to stay quiet more than fifteen seconds at a time, especially when she had the chance of a lifetime to attract attention from a crowd.

"The shock of emerging in our troubled and sinful world," the Hierarch went on with unction, "has proved too great for the delicate nerves of this heavenly being. We must pray that she survives the grossness of our sphere—"

The picture flickered again. Coriole crunched eggshell and said, "A little more came out there. That was when the congregation began to roar. They remembered what happened to Jimmerton. Probably the Hierarch did have some such thing in mind but he knuckled under fast enough when he heard the people protest. He didn't dare risk another uprising. Now watch."

Without an apparent break, the Hierarch steadied after his flicker.

"By the Alembic of the Great Alchemist," he said solemnly, "I swear to you that this angel will be given every care. Look, she begins to stir—" He stood back and Lorna was seen twitching slightly.

"We will prepare her for her sojourn in this humble sphere of ours and obey her orders in all things," he went on. "You will be summoned again when she is ready to receive you. And now, my faithful people, let us chant a song of thanksgiving for this visitation from Paradise."

Dubiously the people began to sing as the horns started up again.

"That's enough of that," Coriole said, dusting his fingers and flicking off the screen. "Now I'll show you something *really* interesting. Watch this."

He got up and knelt before the screen, feeling under the ledge that held the dials. His eyes went slightly crossed with concentration. I heard metal squeak faintly on metal.

Then Coriole said, "Ah!" and lifted the whole panel of dials neatly off. Wires strung from its inner face into the intricacies of the mechanisms within. He laid the panel down on the table, keeping the connections taut, and began to fiddle delicately with bare copper wires inside. I cringed a little.

"This has to be done carefully," Coriole announced with some importance. "Invisible fires can melt your bones if you touch the wrong plates here. But Falvi showed me how to do it and it isn't hard. Now I've got to twist these threads here to those over there—like this—and the thing's done. Excellent. Now you'll see something."

Without replacing the panel, he

twitched a dial again, and this time the screen lit up abruptly without the golden A, the music and the chanting. There was something very businesslike about it now.

"This," Coriole told me, "is a secret known only to the priesthood. The usual talking screens show only a selected few pictures the priests prepare. But if you know the secret you can use the same screens to look almost anywhere you like and eavesdrop on anything that happens in the Temple.

It's a miracle," he added wryly, glancing at me. "What would you like to see now?"

"That machine," I said promptly. "The thing that opens the gate between the worlds." I expected to return by it at some very early date if possible, though there seemed no point in discussing that just now. Still, it would be useful to know a little more about this vital link in my plans.

"How does the thing really work, anyhow?" I inquired.

CORIOLE gave me one of his pale, oblique glances.

"I don't even know how they make the lights go on at night," he said morosely.

"Well, let's have a look at the machine anyhow. Can you show it to me in operation? From behind the scenes, I mean."

"Yes, I think so. It's on record. For some reason they put a sequence on file not long ago. I ran across it just the other day, eavesdropping. A friend of yours is in it incidentally."

He grinned at me and worked diligently at the dials.

Without fanfare a familiar room began to take shape on the screen. The lines for a moment were fuzzy with unfocus, then they steadied and I was looking at a strictly unrehearsed scene in a room I had left a very short while ago.

There was the wall of instruments that meant nothing to me. There was the curtained corner where I'd hidden from Falvi. The round, blank face of the machine looked emptily into the screen. But this time it was partially obscured.

The little room was full of people. The illusion was so perfect that Coriole and I seemed to be peering secretly down out of some window in the wall which had escaped my notice when I was there.

Gazing down on the blue-striped heads and robed shoulders of the men around the machine, I said, "Just how does this work? I mean—"

"It's a spy system. The upper priesthood uses it to check on the junior members and the attendants. You can look into almost any room in the Temple except the Hierarch's private chambers and the secret rooms. Now and then they make recordings of something they want to study—like this. Watch."

He leaned forward a little as a stir of the crowd around the machine heralded something new. Then the heads and shoulders moved aside, leaving a lane, and apparently from directly under us a veiled figure moved. Evidently the hidden lens of the camera was located just over the door.

Coriole leaned still further forward as if he were trying to see around corners in the reflection itself. I saw the men's faces turn to the newcomer, anticipation and excitement showing under every striped headdress.

The veiled woman lifted her arms and put the silvery gauze back from her face. It was a familiar gesture. I knew the way her arms moved and the way her head and neck rose from her shoulders —and I didn't know them. For there was a studied grace in every line of this figure, a certain theatrical self-assurance that had never existed in the original I remembered so well.

"Clia," Coriole said in a flat voice. "I think you know her?"

I craned as he had. I wanted very much to see more of this foreshortened and half averted face. But all I could glimpse was a flicker of much longer lashes than the original Lorna ever had, a flash of beautiful nose and much improved mouth as for an instant she glanced up at the machine.

It was Lorna, all right—but not the Lorna I knew. This was the Clia of the cloud picture, with eyes like blue swimming-pools.

"What makes you think I know her?" I demanded.

"Clia got a thorough questioning as soon as the priests could give it to her," Coriole assured me, still trying to catch sight of the averted, fore-shortened face. He did not take his eyes from the screen, but he went on.

"They had some trouble but eventually they managed to make her understand the language. Falvi told me how.

Something about abstracting the words she seemed to grasp and working out a sort of basic Malescan for her. They wanted to know how she'd happened to fall through and whether anybody else was likely to come too. That's when we got a description of you. Wait—"

He held up one hand for silence. I leaned forward again. The reflected synthetic Lorna in her upward glance had finally realized what this machine was. I think the intoxication of all those admiring glances had probably slowed down even farther her naturally slow reactions. But once she grasped what this wall full of gadgets really was she shrank back a little and said distinctly,

"Oh no! Let me out of here!"

"What did she say?" Coriole demanded with interest.

I told him. He nodded, still watching. He had not taken his eyes from the screen since the graceful figure veiled in silvery gauze appeared on it. Now there was a small turmoil around Lorna, many voices murmured reassurance and they coaxed her forward a little farther.

"What's going on here?" I demanded.

"Wait," was all Coriole would say. So I waited. We watched the rest of the little recorded scene play itself out. There wasn't much. Lorna was objecting violently to the machine and I caught a distinct echo in her new melodious voice of the old raucousness as her temper mounted.

The priests soothed her in vain. The picture ran on for a minute or two and then Lorna whirled with a wide outswing of her veils and stalked from the room, passing directly under our observation post so that we had one brief glimpse of her transfigured face.

She had turned into the Beautiful Princess, all right, I thought morosely. Every detail was there as nearly as I could tell from glimpses. The limpid eyes, the lovely features, the melodious voice only a little marred by the old harsh tinny quality when she was angry.

SO, in spite of myself I was acquiring the attributes of the hero of romance. Here I was in search of the lovely heroine. I couldn't go back without her. And the organization of rebels was ready and waiting for me to join them so I could overthrow the government, release the princess and return home in triumph.

It made me feel very uneasy.

Coriole sighed as Lorna flounced off the screen and the picture faded.

"Exactly what was happening there?" I demanded. "Why were they trying to—"

"Suppose you answer a few questions for a change," my cousin interrupted. "What do you know about Clia? What are your relations with her? She seems to have come through the Earth-Gates from your living quarters. Is she your wife by any chance?"

"God forbid," I said.

He grinned a little, not much. "Good. I see what you mean. She's a fool, of course. Nobody could mistake that. But they've made the most of her. Falvi tells me she was a very ordinary looking woman when she came through. They gave her some of their miraculous treatments and made a beauty of her and they did a fine job.

"You saw how those priests reacted? Falvi says they studied the problem very carefully and chose exactly the features and attitudes that would be most appealing to the average man. A sort of visual semantics, Falvi says. And they called her Clia because—" He paused and chuckled.

"This shows you how clever they were. They went through the records of recent deaths in the country and located a deceased woman who'd had a facial likeness to the new angel. Then they idealized and beautified her into the sort of being you'd expect from Paradise.

"And they spread the word that the deceased Clia had led a life of such extreme virtue she'd gone straight into Paradise, bypassing various incarnations and the final incarnation of priesthood on the way. They announced that Paradise had arranged for the transfigured Clia to come back and tell her story as an inspiration to the rest of humanity."

He was smiling but it seemed to me that his gaze still lingered on the blank screen as if it searched in retrospect for the beautiful face which the priesthood's "visual semantics" had assembled so deftly. Apparently their cleverness had paid off all too well.

I had an idea that a good many Malescans were about half in love with their angelic Clia or the idealization that had been handed to them under that name. I grinned to myself. They ought to know

the real Lorna. That would cure anybody of romantic ideas about Clia.

Coriole twisted a dial idly and a pale uncertain image of a hospital ward flickered before us. He twisted again and the ward dissolved into a room seething with dim translucent children, whose voices came to us in a sort of shrill whispering yammer tuned down almost to silence.

It occurred to me that if the priesthood maintained hospitals and kindergartens it might not be wholly without regard for the welfare of the people, selfish though the regard probably was.

I thought in a vague way that before I threw in with Coriole's side the least I could do was try to get some unbiased slant on the opposition, too. Naturally Coriole was painting his side white and the other side black. If I'd met the priesthood first no doubt I'd have heard an entirely different story with all the values reversed.

Then I remembered it *was* the priesthood I'd met first with lamentable results. Falvi's desire to wipe me out had been purely personal, of course, to cover his own illegal tampering with the machine. Dio, on the other hand, had seemed rather interesting.

"Do you know a priest named Dio?" I asked.

"I do." Coriole sounded grim. "Why?"

THEN I told him my little story about the procession through the streets. He looked thoughtful at the end of it but he shrugged.

"Well, I hope Falvi can handle him. Dio's unpredictable. We've tried to sound him out for joining us but what he wants is a sure thing. He never takes chances unless he's sure they'll pay off. And he isn't quite sure about us.

"Still, I think he has an idea we might just possibly get somewhere, someday. Dio's for Dio first and the winning side next. I suppose he'll keep his mouth shut but it was clever of you to sidetrack him like that. You're just the man we need, cousin. I'm glad you're going to join us."

"Am I? You seem to have it all worked out. Just what plans have you got for me, Coriole?"

"That depends on whether you join us willingly or not." He gave me a very chilly glance. Then I saw an unexpected grin flicker across his face and the Coriole I had first met showed through for an instant—Coriole in his civilian guise, so to speak.

"As the lamb said to the curran," he added, " 'How's that for High?' "

"Very funny," I told him unsympathetically. "Suppose I don't join you?"

"Then I'll turn you over to Falvi," my cousin said, reverting to his military guise with no perceptible effort. "I'm supposing you do join. Then we'll take you to the mountains and give you a course in politics and strategy. You're much too valuable to lose, my dear cousin. For instance—"

Someone rapped sharply on the door.

Coriole and I looked at each other. Neither of us moved. The knocking came again, very loud in this small room. Coriole switched off the screen. Then he got up cautiously and crossed toward the door. On the way his bare foot came down on a broken eggshell and he swore in a whisper, hopped a time or two and limped the rest of the way.

"Who is it?" he demanded.

"It's me—Falvi," an excited whisper declared through the panels. "Let me in. They're after me!"

I could see Coriole's grimace. That was Falvi, all right. Let him in so he could lead the police right to the vital spot! Coriole, standing on one foot and brushing at the injured sole, spoke softly.

"What's the matter?"

"I think I've killed Dio!"

Coriole sighed and unlocked the door, opening it just a crack. I saw Falvi's thin nose thrust eagerly through.

"Let me in, Coriole!"

"Now wait a minute," Coriole said in a patient voice. "I'm busy here. What makes you think you've killed Dio? Did you shoot him?"

"No, I hit him over the head. I tell you they're after me! Let me—"

"What did you hit him with?"

"My sandal. Coriole, will you let me—"

"Then I doubt if he's dead, you fool. You aren't that powerful. Calm down a minute, will you? Who's after you?"

"Well, the guards, I think." Falvi's excitement was beginning to subside.

"You *think?* Did you see them?"

"Well, no, but—"

"You're as safe there as you'd be here," Coriole told him unsympathetically. "Wait—I'll be with you in a second."

He shut and locked the door and turned back to me. Then his eye fell on the dismantled screen and he limped forward and began to work rapidly with the copper wiring he had just readjusted.

"I've got to calm him down," he said. "I'll give you fifteen minutes by yourself to think things over. How about it?"

"Have I got anything to say?"

"No." My cousin gave me his ready grin. "Not a word. You sit tight and don't make any fuss. When I get back we'll start in planning. I'll lock you in so you won't be bothered."

He finished the rewiring, snapped the panel into place and straightened, wrapping himself afresh in the orange towel. "Don't try to get out," he warned. "Remember, Falvi's right outside."

"Have it your own way," I said, watching him unlock the door. A drift of the fragrant fog seeped in through the opening as he looked cautiously out. He spoke to me casually over his freckled shoulder.

"Clia's our real key," he said. "You sit here and think of some way you could talk her into joining our side. We'll have to work fast, you know. Angels from Paradise can get to be a drug on the market if they hang around too long. The Hierarch's planning to send her back to New York any day now." He slipped out into the swirling fog.

"See you later," he said and shut the door. I heard the lock click.

CHAPTER X

Game's End

I HEARD my brain click, too.

So Lorna was going back to New York any day now. Well, well, I thought, in a rather dazed fashion, staring at the blank screen. And I'd had my trouble for nothing, had I? Obviously, that was what the scene with Lorna at the machine had meant. I thought back, trying to remember exactly what had been said. Lorna was objecting and the priests were coaxing her. Why?

I could understand her aversion toward the machine, once she recognized it. That transition between worlds was a very disagreeable experience. For some reason it seemed necessary to persuade her to go willingly. Probably they were planning a big public ceremony when the angel returned to Paradise. It would spoil the show if she didn't seem to want to go back.

But she *was* going back. Well, then, what was I sitting here waiting for? All I had to do was get to the Hierarch and persuade him to send me with her, and everything would be fine again. Or was it that easy?

I scratched my ear and tried to think. There was something wrong here. If this were the familiar melodrama I was reliving, I'd have dived head first into the excitement my cousin was offering. It seemed to promise unlimited chances to swing swords, gallop on fiery steeds and lead lost causes at the top of my voice. But I felt strongly that I was never cut out to be a hero.

For one thing, the hero never pauses to consider what's in it for him before he plunges into combat to overthrow the government. And how did I know the majority of the Malescans wanted their government overthrown? I had only Coriole's word for it.

Assuming that everything he'd said was perfectly accurate, even then I knew I was lacking in the stuff of heroes. It's true that when he was telling me Uncle Jim's story he seemed to be speaking to a quality in my mind that responded. I knew then what real heroes are like—and I knew I wasn't one of them.

It takes conviction, for one thing. Maybe it takes a man who's a misfit in ordinary life and I wasn't a misfit. I was an up and coming young actor with a future in show business. I had everything in the world to go back to if I could take Lorna with me and clear myself.

I thought of that pickpocket on the street. The average hero would have bounded to his defense without waiting to get the facts straight. Before I meddled with Malescan affairs it seemed to me I had better find out exactly what I was doing.

I told myself flatly, "Eddie, let's not get romantic about this. Uncle Jim's case was entirely different. For one thing he was a born adventurer. For another he had a wife and son in Malesco to fight for. No," I went on, "not me. It's not my battle."

Then I poured myself a cup of the cold stuff that had once been hot tea. It had

dregs in it. I sat there looking at the patterns they made in the cup, stirring them around, trying to keep them from settling and trying to keep my own future from taking permanent shape just yet.

The door clicked. Coriole stuck his head in, wreathed in floating fog. He looked worried.

"I've got to go and check up on this Dio business," he said. "Maybe the fool did kill him. You'll be all right for half an hour." It wasn't a question, it was a statement.

"Think so?" I asked.

"Oh yes. I've got a man watching this door. I really have as a matter of fact. I know it sounds like a bluff but it isn't."

"Just what do you think I can do for you as long as you keep a rope around my neck, Coriole?" I demanded.

"Oh, I have lots of plans," he assured me cheerfully. "You're going to help me get rid of the Hierarch."

"Sure, sure," I said. "That ought to be easy."

"As a matter of fact," he repeated, "it won't be too hard the way I've got it figured. Our boys couldn't do it but you're from Paradise. You could get to him. We've got his successor all picked out too—one of us. A lot of the priests are with us, you know. Once the Hierarch's out of the way we'd have a good chance if we worked fast. Oh, you'll help us all right."

"I think you're crazy," I said. "No."

"Of course you will. Cheer up, it won't be as hard as you think. The people are with us. You just sit tight here and watch the pretty pictures. I'll be back for you in half an hour. Remember, there's a man with a gun outside, so do as you're told." The word he used for "gun" was a Malescan word naturally and it didn't mean revolver. But the intent was obvious.

"Goodbye," I said, and turned my back to him. He chuckled and the door clicked. I sat there and stared at the blank screen.

AFTER awhile I got up and squatted in front of the panel, feeling around under it the way Coriole had done. There were smooth pegs underneath, fastening it to the wall. One of them was loose. I worked at it and in a minute it fell off into my hand.

I could get the tips of my fingers under the panel and I gave it a tentative pull. It came soundlessly away from the wall and I had to grab to keep it from falling. I laid it on the table as Coriole had done and squatted there, peering into the thing's innards, wondering just why I was doing this.

"Maybe there's something to be said for the priesthood," I thought. "I'd sort of like to hear their side before I take any permanent steps either way. There's never been an argument yet where *all* the right was on one side. It seems to me I've been brought up on the theory that when a people has an oppressive government it's the government they really want after all."

"By and large, they keep it because they want it." I thought that over and added, "The majority anyhow." Then I said to myself, "Cut out the hedging, Burton, and see what you can make of this gadget."

Actually, it wasn't so hard, even without the secret knowledge Falvi had imparted to his boss conspirator. But being familiar with the "miracle" of electricity, I handled the Malescan version of a television set with due caution.

I'm no expert but I've had to pick up the rudiments of hook-ups at one-night stands backstage in the days when I was working with semi-amateur groups. And I know a little about video, Earth version. Malescan-style video might be different but I soon realized it wasn't too different to understand.

Pretty soon I discovered that Coriole hadn't known what he was doing. Obviously he'd gone through his routine by rote, without knowing the reasons. Television occupies a channel 6,000 kilocycles wide against radio's 10 kilocycles and there's just so much space on the normal band. Back in New York — Paradise, that was—I knew we were getting around this by shifting video to a higher band in the spectrum, and doing it with adapters.

This set had such an adapter. It was what Coriole had rewired and I went through the same motions more cautiously, automatically changing the frequencies on which the set would receive. I went farther than Coriole. His method had missed a whole band of upper frequencies.

It seemed almost too easy but when I thought about it I saw it wasn't, given the Malescan mentality. Malesco was a religious society—Earth's is a mecha-

nistic society. Malescans were conditioned to skip a link in process because they didn't know it was an important link. They believed in the priesthood as we believe in machines.

I'd be the last man to contend that we don't miss a few important links in our own thinking, of course. How many people on Earth have a real sense of process? How many can visualize and evaluate the process that goes into the making of a loaf of bread, for example? Or know the use of the iconoscope with its mosaic light cells, the real miracle of video?

I switched the screen on again and as before that businesslike fast light-up occurred, with no rigmarole of Alchemic A's or background music. I had no idea how to get what I wanted on the thing or even a very clear notion of what it was I wanted.

But I twirled a dial experimentally at random and found myself apparently sailing over a range of mountains studded here and there with shimmers of lights that were probably villages. It was night. I could see the stars in their familiar patterns and, far off at the edge of the sky, a glow that looked like a city. The one I was in? Probably—maybe there was only one city in this world. Was Malesco the city, the country, the world? One or all? I never knew.

I turned the dial again and the picture snapped off like a light and instantly flickered into a focus on a mountain village. I seemed to be looking down the main street of the little town, lighted by overhead incandescents that filtered through the trees lining the street.

It looked like a pleasant small-town street back home except that the parked cars were missing and the adolescents strolling two by two wore strange garments and clustered around a corner building that was not a drug-store but —perhaps—a temple. I couldn't see clearly but I thought I caught a glimpse through the shadows of the leaves that looked like red and yellow lions and shining salamanders painted on the walls.

I tried the dial again and was at some club-meeting of middle-aged Malescan women who seemed to be reading poetry to each other. I visited a theatre where a version of *Medea* was being staged and it startled me very much until I realized that Euripides belonged to a period of the past which we and the Malescans held in common.

It wasn't until much later that Rufus Agricola edged out Claudius and the two worlds split apart. I wondered briefly what had really happened at that point of cleavage. In Caligula's time there were portents in the sky, weren't there? It must have released quite a lot of energy, that cosmic schism in space-time.

THERE seemed to be practically nowhere in Malesco—city, state or world—which this video screen couldn't picture with the right dialing. I sat there, feeling like a spider at the center of an endless web reaching out over a world—by coaxial cable or relay towers or some version of miracle we don't use ourselves—and spying on every dweller here.

The priests were missing no bets. The wonder was they hadn't caught Coriole already—unless they hadn't cared to. Could that be it? Was he not as important as he thought, not as dangerous? Or were the Alchemists wise enough to permit latitude for the blowing off of steam?

For ten minutes or so I swooped and soared over Malesco, my vision riding the air-waves of an alien world, moving in vast curves above the heads of unsuspecting people whom I would never see or know. I tuned in briefly on a vision of New York, and had again that disorienting feeling of being in two places at once, the surge of homesickness as I sat in an alien room on an alien world and looked right down on the familiar streets of my own neighborhood.

It was when I was trying to find in my fumbling way what kind of screen the New York scene was projected on that I ran into my fatal error.

New York without warning went suddenly blank in a blinding dazzle of blue-white light. The brillance centered in the lower right-hand quarter of the screen and seemed to spread from a minor sun which had come into unexpected being about two feet from my face.

The light was so strong I couldn't look at it, so curiously compelling that I couldn't look away. I sat there paralyzed for a moment, feeling jagged lightning-flashes of pain zig-zag through my head, helpless to turn my eyes away.

Then the sun blinked out and I slapped both hands to my eyes and squeezed my forehead to keep it from splitting in two. Bright orange after-

images swam like amoebas inside my lids. When the pain subsided a little I began to be able to hear again and I realized that somebody had been asking me the same question over and over, with increasingly angry intonations.

"What are you doing here?" a man was demanding. "Give me the code-word before I—"

I blinked tearfully at the screen. Through streaming eyes I saw a somewhat unshaven face between the flaps of the priestly headdress, small squinting eyes boring into mine and, chest-high between us, gripped in a hairy fist, a glass cylinder about the size of a pint milk bottle, glowing and fading rather angrily like a large irritated firefly.

I started to say, "Don't shoot!" and something told me my voice would quaver when I did it, for I was scared and I didn't even feel called upon to hide it, in that first moment. However impossible it may seem that a man at the other end of a video hookup could shoot and kill me through the relay system, I'd just had convincing proof that he could certainly do me grave harm. Maybe that thing would kill, at that.

I wiped my eyes on a corner of the blue towel and put on as haughty a look as I could manage with the tears still streaming from my stinging lids. I didn't know what I was going to say but I knew I'd better say it fast. The priest had caught me at something I had no business to meddle with and he'd probably feel perfectly justified in using the fullest power of his milk bottle to punish me unless I spoke first—and fast.

It was time for Allan Quatermain or possibly John Carter to take over. I drew a deep breath and told myself I was a hero. In a hero's loud decisive bullying voice I said sharply, *"Drop that, you fool!"*

The priest's bristly jaw fell slightly. There is this to say about wearing nothing but a towel—manners make the man when his clothes are missing. If I'd been wearing a peasant's outfit or a clerk's apron I wouldn't have got away with this.

But for all the priest knew I might be a visiting High Priest from the other side of the world. Certainly the fact that he'd caught me monkeying with the top-secret video band, known only to the inner circles of the priesthood, would indicate that I might be important.

HE DIDN'T drop his pint bottle but he lowered it a little and blinked at me in a puzzled way.

"Let's have that code-word," he said, somewhat more politely. "You've got no business on this band."

A rapid summary of thoughts scampered through my head. I knew now why I had been dabbling at random in the private television relay of Malesco's rulers. In a half-aware sort of way I'd been hunting an excuse for the priesthood, so I could let myself confide in them. Naturally Coriole would paint them dead black to me. He wanted my help.

I could join Coriole, overthrow the Hierarch if we were lucky, risk my neck a hundred times over and finally win the right to take Lorna back to Earth and resume my job in peace. Or I could quietly walk back to the Temple I'd recently left, report to the Hierarch and the chances were he'd be only too glad to get rid of me by sending me back where I came from, along with Lorna.

Since he'd probably not read Burroughs or Haggard he wouldn't realize that all High Priests are supposed to be wicked from preference and spend all their time persecuting the hero and heroine. Primarily the Hierarch was simply a business man, an executive administering a very complex organization. It would be a waste motion, really, to do anything to me but send back, especially since—unless Coriole lied—he meant to send Lorna back anyhow.

And yet there was a nagging indecision in my mind, like a mouse chewing at the foundation of all this logical construction I'd reared. Was it a moral conditioning I'd got from reading too many melodramas? Or did I really owe Coriole and the people of Malesco something?

The priest with the pint bottle settled the whole question for me.

"There's a squad on the way to pick you up," he said briskly, evidently having reached a decision while I was arguing with myself. "Be there in ten minutes. Don't try to get away or I'll burn you to a crisp."

My first feeling was relief. That was that, then. The decision had been made for me. But a few seconds of further thought told me I couldn't take this quietly. I'd got the upper hand over the priest simply by bullying but it was a precarious hold and I'd lose it if I al-

lowed the police to drag me off to a precinct station and work me over trying to find out my secret.

I gave the screen a brisk tap that made the priest blur.

"Fool!" I said in my best bullying manner, "I'm from New York!" I gave him the A-sign with fingers and thumbs and grinned arrogantly, trying to show I didn't believe in the sanctity of Paradise.

"Switch me to the Hierarch," I commanded while he was still staggering from the impact of my wisdom and cynicism. It had a real effect, too. His jaw dropped again and he did three double-takes in a row, obviously not certain whether to blast me where I stood for sacrilege or kowtow to a visitant from Hierarchical circles if not from Paradise itself.

I got away with it. This priest wasn't sure enough of himself to switch me straight to the top but he'd had enough trying to deal with me on his own and he put me through to five or six successively higher officials, each of whom wavered between bewilderment and rage at my attitude.

Finally, unlikely as it seems, an obsequious face took shape in the screen, murmured a few warning platitudes about the great audience I was about to be vouchsafed and, with a good deal of throat-clearing and harrumphing, the Hierarch himself looked me in the eye.

Seen this closely he was less like Santa Claus and more like a juggernaut than I'd expected from my long-view glimpse. It shows how far astray you can go when you try to judge a new world by old-world analogies. I was still a little dazed by my success in putting across such a colossal bluff on such feeble evidence. The only explanation must be the very low level of Malescan self-confidence in sub-ecclesiastical circles. The common man, in other words, must be something of a worm. Back home I'd never have got away with it. Here nobody seriously doubted that I could back up my grandiose claims.

SO, LOOKING this fat man firmly in the eye, I told him the simple truth, And I wasn't obsequious about it. I know that in conversation with the mighty you're supposed to let them speak first and introduce all the topics but it didn't seem to me that this man would be made easier to deal with by polite methods.

"You're the Hierarch, are you?" I said in my loud bullying voice. "I hope nobody's listening—this is private." But I didn't wait for him to cover his connections. That was his lookout, not mine. I went right on.

"I'm from New York," I said. "The girl Clia came through as Lorna Maxwell. She came from my chambers in Manhattan. I've got something important to tell you about your organization but I'll save it until I'm with you. I understand there's a squad on the way to pick me up here now. If you're wise you'll see they act as my escort, not my captors. That's all. What do you say?"

The Hierarch was a clever man. He didn't gape or blink like the others. Neither did he puff up with outrage. He just stood there, looking at me reflectively out of his small eyes rimmed with fat. Then he blew out his cheeks and spoke in a rich rather thick voice.

"Very interesting. Very interesting indeed. I'll give the proper orders."

Then he sank his chin into three subchins and looked at me stolidly. I had no idea what he was thinking. He was a remarkable character, this man. Fat, yes, but not obese—obesity changes when it's dynamic and he was dynamic in exactly the same degree a bulldozer is.

He had the same absolute confidence. I had the impression that, like a bulldozer, if he actually found himself facing an obstacle, he'd pause, back off and roll ponderously forward again and again, until the barrier was smashed and ground under.

He wasn't going to be easy to fool. I couldn't even tell if I'd impressed him. Those small thoughtful eyes might be looking right through mine into the chaotic indecision of my brain. I wondered if they were. I wondered so much that for an instant I felt my own confidence oozing away, which showed me how dangerous the Hierarch was. I took a deep breath, reminded myself of John Carter and Allan Quatermain again and began thinking rapidly.

"Look here," I said, keeping my voice at its loud confident level. "I've got my reasons for wanting to reach you quietly. I want to walk out of here without being noticed. Tell your men to knock quietly and then step back and let me come out without attracting attention. It's foggy here. They can do it

without starting a commotion. Have you got that?"

The Hierarch nodded silently, his eyes still regarding me without expression.

"Good. I'll go to the locker and dress and then walk back to the Temple. Your men can follow me but I want them to keep their distance. I've got good reasons for all this but I'd rather tell you privately what they are."

The Hierarch cleared his throat carefully.

"Very well," he said. "Your orders have gone out. They'll be obeyed."

But the way he looked at me was frightening. And for the first time since I'd fallen through into Malesco, I had the sudden conviction that this was after all no game. It wasn't a melodrama whose script was running through with wisecracking asides whenever I came across a stereotyped characterization. The Hierarch fitted no classification I knew. It wasn't a game with him. He had more confidence than I did, and he frightened me.

It was as if I'd been playing soldiers with a bunch of four-year-olds, and suddenly looked up to find myself face to face with a guy in battle dress, scowling at me and setting up a bazooka. When the Hierarch came in, abruptly it wasn't a game any more. I couldn't fool the Hierarch long. Maybe I hadn't fooled him at all.

CHAPTER XI

The Fire Machine

BUT HE gave me all the rope I needed. My orders were carried out to the letter. I put the video screen back in its original condition, ate a few red grapes and much sooner than I expected I heard a quick soft knock on the door.

"Who's there?" I demanded quietly through the panels.

"At your orders, sir," a voice murmured.

"Open the door then," I said. "I'm locked in."

I thought, "If it's Coriole he won't do it" But I heard a scraping and clicking outside and then the door swung inward, letting in a few wreaths of pungent fog.

"Waiting your commands, sir," the voice said softly.

"All right. Listen." I put my face into the crack and whispered to the dim unfamiliar face that looked respectfully into mine. "I think somebody may be waiting in the fog to shoot me. I've been held prisoner here. Get your men together around the door to hide me when I come out.

"Once I'm in the fog nobody will recognize me. Keep close but act as if you weren't following me and make sure nobody else does. I don't want anybody hurt, you understand—just let me get out of here without any trouble. Got it?"

"Yes, sir," the face assured me.

And that's the way I got out of the Divine Baths.

Don't ask me why I did it that way. I didn't know myself. I could have had Coriole and his whole gang rounded up and carried away in chains. But all I wanted right then was to get out without causing any trouble.

I guess I was afraid that Coriole, if he saw me being openly arrested, might try to rescue me, and I had decided I didn't want to be rescued. I doubted if he could do it anyhow, but he might try. And dubious though I felt about my cousin, I didn't want him killed or captured just then. I wanted everything to stay nice and smooth and quiet until I could get my brain started again.

And everything did—for about twenty minutes.

It took me that long to find the locker room, dress, struggle into my priestly robes and headdress and start my casual stroll back the way I had come—toward the Temple.

I felt like a very different man as I crossed the enormous rotunda of the Baths toward the front entry. The air still swam with music, voices, confetti, advertising streamers and drifts of mist. The crowd had not altered except to increase a little.

Malesco seemed to be moving toward the peak of its evening entertainment and much of the entertainment seemed to be available right under this spectacular dome. I fought my way through snowfalls of streamers that wound enticingly around my neck as they insinuated that I'd enjoy Crescence or a Nip at the Nip Bar.

I knew where I was going this time. I strode like a hero across the rotunda

and out under the arch of the front door. People were streaming both ways on the broad steps. I went down without looking back. I felt confident that I was being escorted though I hadn't spotted my faithful followers in any of several backward glances. Not even Coriole was to be seen anywhere and Falvi and Dio—if Dio were still alive—were luckily missing too.

I turned right at the foot of the steps and retraced my path toward the Temple, which I could see from here towering above the roofs between, a vast white building with a frieze of the usual colored symbols around its height.

I had, naturally, no idea that halfway between here and there I was going to become a hero in sober fact. I was about to perform a deed which would go ringing down the corridors of Malescan history and alter the course of empire. But I didn't know it then nor at the time I did it nor for some time after.

I wish I could tell you it was a real deed of heroism. I wish—now—that I could have been immortalized doing something really dramatic—fighting off fifty men with great sweeps of my trusty sword or beheading a dragon at the corner of the Highroad of the Hierarch and Goldsmith Lane, which is where the thing happened. But it wasn't anything glorious I did.

I simply lit my cigarette lighter.

ANYBODY could do it. Most people do daily without going down in the annals of a world-nation as a deliverer of the highest quality. I did it absent-mindedly, quite without thinking, or I wouldn't have done it at all.

I was halfway to the Temple. The streets were crowded and nobody seemed to be paying me the slightest attention. I knew if I made any false moves things would start happening fast but I didn't mean to make any. All I wanted was to get peaceably to the Hierarch and after that back to New York as quickly and simply as possible.

The one trouble in my mind was that I'd have to work up some tale for the Hierarch when I saw him, something worthy of the build-up I'd given it over the video connection. What that would be I had no idea. I'd definitely decided not to give Coriole away if I could help it.

Of course if they started limbering up the thumbscrews I'd probably talk. Coriole had shown no signs of tender feeling for me and I wasn't obligated to undergo any third degrees for him. He had meant to use me for what I was worth to him. Since I was, in the abstract, sympathetic toward his cause, I'd protect him if I could but not at the cost of my own skin.

I was racking my brain for a plausible lie to tell the Hierarch, and realizing with a cold sensation along my backbone how hard it would be to put any lies across when a small baldheaded man came hurrying toward me through the crowd, his bare crown lowered, boring along busily and not looking up.

I stepped a little aside to let him pass. He wore, I noticed without interest, a blue cloak with a flat collar of polished metal made in links, and so shiny I could see his lowered face reflected on his chest in a rather disorienting way as if he had two heads, one of them upside down and chin to chin.

The odd thing was that he glanced up suddenly as he neared me, keeping his head down but looking under his brows so that I unexpectedly met two pairs of his eyes, one in the normal place and one looking up horribly from the middle of his chest, upside down. I shuddered slightly and made way for him.

He jostled me a little with his shoulder, reached out to steady me and smacked something hard, smooth and flat squarely into my palm as he did so. It was pure stupidity that saved me from lifting it openly to stare at it in the light shining down from the building along the street.

I was so startled it didn't cross my mind for a moment that this was standard melodrama straight out of Fu Manchu. I suppose I didn't think of it because the little man was so completely lacking in romance, with his bald head and his four eyes. A veiled lady would have found me with all the proper responses on tap but not a stooped little bald-head with his eyes in the middle of his chest.

He hurried on past me and melted into the crowd before I had time for any mental processes to take place. I just kept stupidly on my way, clutching the flat thing and wondering what had happened. Luckily this was exactly what I'd have done if my mind had been clicking like a Gieger counter all along, so

that was okay. The trouble started when I tried to look at the thing.

Automatically, when I realized what I'd got, I thrust the hand that held it into my pocket through a convenient side opening in the robe I wore. All I could think of was to hide it until I could inspect the thing in private.

My fingers told me nothing. It was smooth, square, about the size of a soda-cracker. It could be anything. (It occurs to me at this point that most of my similes in Malesco seemed to turn around eatables and drinkables, probably an unconscious reference to the fact that I was undernourished all during my stay.)

These streets were all too well-lighted. You think of lights as a sign of civilized progress but as a matter of fact I suppose they're really a sign of incipient lawlessness kept firmly in check, just as broad straight avenues when first introduced into city planning were chiefly useful to fire volleys of musketry and cannon down, a thing you couldn't do in crooked streets.

Malescan lighting consisted of looped and scrolled tubing that glowed like neon and ran along both sides of the streets about ten feet above the sidewalk on the faces of the buildings. The only break was at crossings.

It was just the opposite to our systems, in which the streets furnish the channels of illumination late at night and the buildings are dark. I suppose this was because Malescan vehicular traffic was quite light. Malesco is a world of pedestrians—or was then.

I had some vague plan of trying to get a glimpse of my mysterious object while crossing the street. With this in mind I palmed the thing and drew it out of my pocket as I stepped off the low curved curbing into the lanes of lazy traffic. People were all around me but nobody paid me much heed except to get respectfully out of my way when they realized what robes I wore.

I got the thing out of my pocket. I got it up within sight in the dim reflection from the neons. I saw only that it was white and had several rows of gilt script on it which I couldn't read very well. Then some clumsy fool behind me pushed past and knocked it out of my hand.

My mind scattered its thoughts broadcast. I hadn't an idea in my head. I just dived after the thing as it went spinning among the feet of the passers-by, interested only in getting it back before anybody noticed I had it. Which hope in itself shows the low state of my mentality just then.

The white square skittered across the pavement and vanished under the curve of the curbing on the opposite side. I wasn't thinking at all. I just groped in my pocket out of pure habit and found my cigarette lighter in its usual place down at the bottom under everything else. I pulled it out. My thumb automatically touched the wheel and spun it. Flame leaped up in my fist and I stooped above the dark overhang of the curb.

There it was, my little white and gilt enigma, twinkling in the light. I reached for it—and fumbled. My finger gave it a flick and away it sailed into some dark opening under the sidewalk. I heard a distant splash. The plastic soda-cracker had vanished down a sewer-grating, gone on its long voyage home in the mysterious underground of Malesco.

And that, again, was that.

YOU may as well know now that the thing had been a message from Coriole. That fancy gilt writing on white squares is the Malescan equivalent of a scratch-pad and you can use it over and over indefinitely. But just then it seemed to me that the secret of the ages had been in my hand and I'd lost it.

I squatted beside the curb, heedless of the crowd, cursing quietly and holding in my fist the newly-ignited flame which, they assure me, will never go out as long as written history survives in Malesco. The first person to notice it was a middle-aged man with a stupid face. He tapped me respectfully on the shoulder and I looked up blankly.

It was then, with the sudden motion, that I felt a draft around my ears and realized I had somehow lost my headdress in my wild scramble across the street. In the same moment I realized that my hair was cut in a very unecclesiastical fashion and that, as I squatted there, my priestly robe had come apart to reveal very exotic—for Malesco—trousers and shoes and Argyle socks. I saw the man take all this in.

"Excuse me," he said. "Are you a priest?"

"No," I told him. "Why?"

Note that I'd have said I was if there seemed any chance to get away with the masquerade. But my other-worldly garments were a bad giveaway and I didn't want to get into any arguments. I wondered briefly where my escort was and if they felt this was all part of my mysterious plan. I hoped so.

"Because," the middle-aged man said, "I thought I saw you just make a fire. With a *machine!* Is that little thing a *machine?* Will you show me how it works?"

Without considering the consequences I obliged him by blowing out the flame and igniting it again with a spin of the wheel that threw out brief sparks. The man leaned closer and sniffed excitedly at the reek of lighter-fluid.

"Miracle-juice!" he said. "I knew it! I've smelled the same holy smell in the air around the pumping stations. How does it work? Would you explain to me how it works?"

"The flint strikes a spark—" I began cautiously and then paused. A second man was peering over the first man's shoulder and two more had paused on both sides, looking down with incongruous excitement at the lighter as I extinguished and kindled the flame anew to illustrate my simple lecture.

That was all it took.

Nobody could have imagined the hunger for process which must have been consuming these people, unsuspected for an unguessably long time. It was function and the process of function that entranced them.

In New York a man casually working a miracle on a street-corner wouldn't attract any more of a crowd than I attracted at the corner of Hierarch Highway and Goldsmith Lane in Malesco by operating a simple mechanism in sight of the public. Miracles they were used to. Machines were the real miracle to them.

"Show me how it works!" a shrill voice demanded excitedly at my elbow. "The little wheel turns—why? What happens then? What makes it turn?"

"Let me see!" another voice broke in. "Look out, I want to—"

"The little wheel turns," somebody was explaining importantly back in the crowd. "Then it makes sparks. Then the miracle-juice catches fire and the man makes a real flame jump up right out of his hand!"

"It's a machine!" I heard voices declaring several heads away in the rapidly-gathering crowd. "A *machine!* The man knows how to make it work! Look here, it's like this, the little wheel turns and—"

"Sacrilege!" somebody whispered. "Treason! Let me out of here!"

But the angry mutters which greeted this reaction must have made the prudent speaker shut up, for no more was heard from him though it did seem to me that I caught murmurs of fear now and then as an undertone to the general rising babble. Most of it had to do with the little wheel turning and the miracle-juice and everyone seemed to be explaining to everyone else exactly how the machine worked.

I stood up and flipped the lighter shut. I dropped it into my pocket.

"All right, that's enough," I said in my loud bullying hero's voice. "Stand back there and let me by. That's enough, I said!"

Rather timidly the crowd parted. These people had been conditioned to obedience for countless generations and the voice of authority made their reflexes work. But the light of excitement on their faces was not so easily quenched. I looked nervously around, trying to spot my escort, but they were still obeying orders and I saw no one I knew.

CHAPTER XII

On to the Temple

THERE seemed nothing to do but go on. I ordered the submissive crowd out of my way again and strode forward, the robe swirling irritatingly away from my trousered legs. The colors in my Argyle socks seemed to fascinate every eye. I was as exotically garbed as if I wore velvet and brocade on a New York street.

The crowd seemed helpless before the double charm of my socks and my astounding knowledge of mechanics. I heard awed murmurs about the little wheel sparking as I pushed through the fringe of my admirers and went hastily on toward the Temple.

It should have ended there. Probably

it would have nine times out of ten. But this was the tenth time. I went about fifteen feet, then glanced uneasily back—and they were following me. Timidly, respectfully, but determined as so many pet dogs that have no intention whatever of going home, no matter how often you shout at them.

For a moment or two I did shout. I waved them back and told them sternly to leave me alone, to go back about their business. They looked at me, scared but stubborn. What had become of my escort I had no idea. Maybe they too were among this irresistibly fascinated throng. Maybe they were watching from the sidelines. Anyhow, they did nothing to help.

I kept at it until I began to feel too much like a man trying to send his dog home to keep my face straight. There was nothing to do but turn away and ignore them, which I did. Like a pied piper in Argyle socks I stalked down the Malescan street, hearing the rising murmur behind me as more and more curious bystanders joined my following throng. The saga of the little wheel was on every tongue. The sparks it shot out acquired fresh fame with every step I took.

Then it got worse. I heard someone say distinctly, "He's leading us to the Temple. He's going to teach us all how to make fire jump out of the little wheel."

I whirled angrily. Whoever had spoken was silent now. The eyes of my followers met mine eagerly. And what could I do? Shouts hadn't moved them. Denials wouldn't either. This was sheer determined wishful thinking. It was already bigger than I was and growing every minute. The starvation of the human mind, denied process, was a thing I couldn't cope with.

Suddenly I felt sorry for them. And I was aware of a quick, increasing respect. For all they knew the squads of the Temple guard might swoop down at any moment and arrest them all. And yet they followed, hypnotized by the glimpse they'd had of a machine openly used in the street, where every eye could see and every mind understand how it worked.

So I went on. The rumors spread. They caught up with me and began to run ahead and they were fantastic. I was going to teach all Malesco how every miracle in the city was performed. I was going to overthrow the Hierarch and administer the Alchemic Mysteries myself.

No, I was hand in glove with the Hierarch and leading them all to their doom. This latter rumor had no effect whatever. Curiosity was stronger now than fear and anyhow this crowd was getting too big to punish. Each man took courage from the number of his neighbors.

By the time I reached the great square in front of the Temple the murmuring of my followers had swelled into a low insistent roar. Nobody was shouting. Nobody was really talking loudly. But the combined voices had their own volume, and there was irresistible excitement in it.

I saw the astonished faces of priests looking out of the gate and peering over the painted walls. There were faces at every window on this side of the Temple and in the houses we passed women and children peered out with timid exultation and men came from every doorway to join our throng.

I crossed the big flood-lighted square slowly, in spite of myself feeling very important. Common sense told me that I had done nothing very superlative after all but the awed admiration of the crowd was insidious. It came to me irresistibly how much more I knew than they did, how deeply they admired me for my wisdom—also, perhaps, for my socks.

I expect I strutted a little. It isn't every man who inspires thousands of people to follow him, helpless to resist as the children who followed the pied piper, hypnotized by his ability to spin a small wheel and strike sparks with it. It isn't every man who—

SUDDENLY it came to me what I was doing. I stopped dead still for a second. I was a hero! I was indubitably leading a vast crowd of inspired followers, obedient to my every whim. I was advancing on the stronghold of the wicked High Priest who held the beautiful heroine captive in his toils.

I was on my way to rescue Lorna and force the Hierarch to send us back to Earth and it was my own skill and knowledge that had made this possible, my own prowess with a flint and steel. Good heavens, it had happened after all!

"Quatermain, move over!" I murmured to myself and crossed the rest of the square at a rapid stride. I felt imposingly tall. I thrust my elbows out to make my cloak billow in the wind. It was a perfect set-up. All I lacked was the long, glittering sword.

True, the cigarette lighter had proved more potent as a weapon but it lacked a certain something so far as dash went. Still, you can't have everything. What I did have was far more than I had ever expected, even in my wildest dreams.

I came to the flight of steps leading up to the entrance gate. As I set my foot on the lowest step, a man in a grey tunic and cloak emerged from the crowd just behind me. Another man in the same uniform appeared suddenly on my other side. Two more followed them and two after that. Five in all—one squad, Malescan version. Why they deemed it wise at this particular point to take off their cloaks of invisibility I didn't know.

"Where were you?" I demanded of the nearest, remembering his face in the fog at my door, back there in the Divine Baths. "What happened?"

"Nothing, sir. We followed our orders. We escorted you here."

I looked at him in silence. No reasoning processes naturally. He might well explain in effect, "I seen my duty and I done it," and that was that. If he'd dispersed the crowd as any rational policeman should have done when it first showed signs of getting out of control—

But by now I was very glad he hadn't. He might have explanations to make to the Hierarch but I was well satisfied. I knew what I was going to say to the Hierarch. Now I had force behind my arguments. I was going back to Earth in style with a send-off suitable to heroes.

Unfortunately for my self-esteeem I paused at the top of the steps to look back and bid farewell to my faithful followers.

There they seethed in their thousands. It's hard to estimate numbers at night in such volume. They filled most of the square in front of the Temple.

They stood solidly together, not wavering, not melting away in the back even though the priests were eyeing them sternly from every window. I had one final moment of egocentric pride in which I must have looked rather like Mussolini making chests from his balcony.

Then I caught a familiar eye in the front ranks of the crowd. Coriole was grinning up at me cheerfully. Beside him was the bald head of the man who had slipped the message to me and started this whole mass movement. And then my ego deflated suddenly and I realized what was behind this demonstration.

It hadn't been wholly spontaneous, I felt perfectly sure. It wasn't wholly for the inspiration of my wisdom that they'd gathered to follow me. Coriole's hand showed plainly in this—Coriole, who had certainly had training in the handling of mobs.

It seemed to me now that, as I glanced around the upturned faces, I could spot here and there the sober eyes of the men and women who had helped fan the flame I lighted. Most of the people were still drunk with the unwonted excitement of the mob but there were quiet faces too and I assigned them, rightly or wrongly, to Coriole's people.

So he had outwitted me. He'd used me as a tool to rouse the rabble, taking advantage of as small an incident as the cigarette-lighter flurry to call half the city, apparently, to a mustering before the Temple. And what happened now was up to him.

Or was it up to me?

He was searching my face with sober interest, the smile gone. I met his gaze without expression. How could I tell what I was going to do? I gave him a nod and turned away. The squad of my guards closed in around me. The gate opened. I could see priests milling excitedly inside as I stepped forward.

Coriole's voice stopped me. Thin and small in the unechoing vastness of the square it soared above the low rumble of the crowd. He was shouting a single word but it was a rabble-rouser. It was the most dangerous word a man could shout in Malescan streets.

"Jimmerton!" Coriole yelled. *"Jimmerton!"*

The sound rolled back like an echo through the crowd. You could hear it rising and taking shape on every tongue, so that at first it was a soft dangerous babble of mingling syllables, then a coherent mutter, finally a roar.

"Jimmerton, Jimmerton, Jimmerton!"

The sound filled the square and echoed from the Temple walls. The crowd rocked with it. Someone had given them

a voice at last, an articulate word to speak that would express all they needed to express in a single name. They put all they had into it.

"Jimmerton, Jimmerton!"

I SAW Coriole nudge the bald man, who jumped out briskly and ran up the steps a little way, then turned and waved his arms at the swaying crowd. Everybody within hearing must have known exactly what that shouted name meant, every connotation of it. But the bald man put it into explicit words.

"Don't let it happen again, men!" he cried in a shrill voice to the throng. "Remember Jimmerton! If the Hierarch gets this man too we'll never see him again!" His voice was thin and it broke on the higher notes. It didn't carry, though I could see the cords stand out on his neck as he tried. But he didn't need any mechanical amplifier to project his words.

The front ranks of the crowd caught them up and tossed them back and out until every listener in the square must have heard what he said. With embellishments and additions, if I knew that crowd—though perhaps it had been Coriole's men who spread some of the wilder rumors about me.

"Don't let it happen again!" my would-be benefactor shouted squeakily but valiantly. "Don't let them do it! Remember Jimmerton! Remember—"

The responding roar drowned him out. They were frighteningly agreed on the single subject of my future. The Hierarch was not to have me.

It didn't suit me at all. I was touched and impressed by this display of courage in the very face of the Temple, though I had acquired enough sense in the past few minutes to realize it was no personal tribute they were paying me. I was a symbol, not a man. I was Function. I was Process. I was all the maturity and adulthood they had been denied for nearly two thousand years.

They thought I was.

But it was more of a burden than I could carry for them. This rousing moment in the night was all very well, but what could it lead to? How could I help them? I couldn't. If Coriole thought he was rescuing me from my enemies he would have to think again.

I lifted both arms dramatically at the top of the steps. The crowd milled with excitement and silence fell across it section by section, the farthest growing quiet last of all. The bald-headed man turned to look up at me, his mouth a little open in anticipation. I cleared my throat. My voice usually carries well enough, in a theatre but it sounded thin and flat in the tremendous roofless space of the square.

"Let me go in," I shouted. "I must talk to the Hierarch. I must follow my own plans. Let me go—but wait."

Coriole, who had been watching me too with the most painful attention, suddenly jumped to the lowest step and shouted as loudly as he could, "Yes, let him go—and wait! He knows his duty. He speaks for us all. But remember Jimmerton! Be sure he comes out again! Wait until he comes! All of you! Remember Jimmerton—and wait!"

"Wait!" the crowd roared, with a volume that made the steps tremble under us. *"Wait! Remember Jimmerton!"*

I raised my arms again. "Give me an hour," I said. "I'll come back to you in an hour. Will you wait?"

The responding thunder of their voices had the volume of a summer storm. They would wait. They remembered Jimmerton once more, in a tremendous reverberant shout and settled down into noisy milling quiet to keep their promise.

CHAPTER XIII

The Deal

THE priests were scared. I went in through the gate with my escort, receiving awed and angry stares from every eye, hearing the sibilance of the whispers that ran before and after me all the way. Everyone was bewildered. Nobody seemed to understand exactly what had happened.

There must have been rumors about my unorthodox tampering with the top-secret video band because I'd talked to too many people on my way to contact with the Hierarch to keep that experience quiet. And then the utterly unexpected, apparently spontaneous springing up of the crowd—it looked like military genius on my part.

I wondered what would happen to the

crowd. I wondered even more poignantly what would happen to me. I had a powerful weapon now, but I could so easily fumble it. I didn't know how the Hierarch usually dealt with crowds. Judging by what I'd seen and heard it should be easy for him to work a miracle and wipe out the entire mob down there in the square. I wasn't sure why he hadn't.

We crossed the big hall swarming with gaping priests, all of them looking at me but obviously stretching an ear apiece toward the dull noises of the waiting crowd. We came to the shaft down which I had so nearly dashed myself to pieces.

We stepped into empty air—the thing went down indefinitely to gloomy depths underground — and rose like cherubs up the shaft. I may as well say now that I never did learn how that levitation trick worked.

None of us spoke a word. We soared the full height of the shaft and stepped neatly out in unison on a platform on the top floor. There was a broad hall before us painted with salamanders in gold. At the end of it was a purple curtain looped back over double doors. A little mob of priests, their headflaps agitated, hung around these doors, talking in whispers and rolling their eyes unhappily as they saw us come.

The double doors swung open. We marched in under the sweep of curtain. And just as we passed the agitated little group I caught a glimpse of a calm dissipated-looking face among them regarding me with a rather smug grin

It was Dio.

I would have said there wasn't a square inch of my brain just then that wasn't packed with worried thoughts but a small pinwheel of fresh alarm went off in an unused corner and began shooting out sparks.

How much did he know about my interview with Coriole? Did his presence here mean Falvi's arrest for attempted murder? Obviously Dio wasn't dead after all, but it occurred to me that I might be if he shot off his mouth at the wrong time and place.

He looked overwhelmingly complacent, like a man who has used great forethought, picked the winning side and settled comfortably back to watch the losers put up their vain but gallant fight.

I didn't feel gallant. I was going to pick the winning side too. Coriole had been just a mite too clever, I thought, in maneuvering me into a spot where I practically had to promise the crowd to fight for them. But he'd forgotten one minor matter—maybe I wouldn't hang around here to see the crowd demonstrate.

I had every intention of grabbing Lorna and making the plunge back through the wall between worlds as fast as was humanly possible. After that—well, let the two factions fight it out between them. It wasn't my battle.

Inside the double doors was a waiting-room lined with nervous priests. Never losing a beat we marched on through. The nearer we got to the Hierarch the higher the tension mounted in everyone concerned.

The priests downstairs had been nervous enough. Those in the hall had been practically biting their nails. These in the anteroom almost twanged with tense nerves. I wasn't feeling any too relaxed myself. The Hierarch had frightened me even on a video screen.

My guards flung open an inner door and stood back, deserting me. I went through alone.

The Hierarch sat at a big desk made out of solid gold. It was hideous. You couldn't have crowded one more scrolled dragon or curly lion onto its carving if your life depended on it. Queen Victoria would have loved that desk.

The Hierarch stood up. His eyes met mine. And suddenly all confidence I had been able to retain so far vanished out of me between one breath and the next. I lost all desire to make smart-aleck cracks about Malesco. I was nothing but a second-string actor from a minor Broadway play, astray in the wrong world and deserted by the phenomenal luck that had brought me this far. The Hierarch was no joking matter.

HE wasn't very tall. But he was broad and solid and his purple and gold robes didn't add a thing to the immense dignity and confidence of the man. He'd have looked the same in sackcloth. His little expressionless eyes regarded me with cold dispassion under the fat lids.

There were three jittery priests in the room with us. One of them jumped to pull his chair back as he rose. He rolled forward with that bulldozer gait

toward me. There was a chair in the way. He didn't even glance at it. One of the priests almost dislocated an arm snatching it out of the way in time and the Hierarch surged forward.

I think he would have trampled it under rather than move around the obstacle. I was reminded again of Queen Victoria, and the legend that she never looked back at her chair before she sat down. She just sat, confident that someone would shove a chair under her in time. She had been born a queen, you see.

The Hierarch paused six feet away and breathed through his nose, loudly. His voice was thick and rich. He wasted few words on me.

"Talk," he said.

I looked him in the eye. I thought of Dio hovering outside the door, undoubtedly waiting the right moment to do or say whatever would be best for Dio. I thought of the crowd seething around the Temple wall, waiting for me, and a little confidence flowed back into my mind. Not much. About a teaspoonful, perhaps. But it was more than welcome there. "You," I said in my best hero's voice, "are going to send me back to New York with Clia. *Now.*"

We important people don't waste our words. I snapped my jaw shut and glared at him with a great show of confidence.

The Hierarch's little eyes never swerved from mine but he made a soft snapping noise with one hand and a priest hurried up beside him and lifted a familiar weapon chest-high, facing me. It was another of those glowing milk-bottles and as I looked a warning flash blazed out of it, obliterating the whole room for a second.

I didn't dare hesitate. Taking careful aim, I squinted my eyes nearly shut, stepped forward a pace and with one deft smack knocked the bottle out of the priest's hands. It bounced softly in the carpet, its glow dying.

"That's enough of that," I told the Hierarch in a firm voice. "I'm no hired thug. I came here unarmed. You needn't be afraid of me if you do as you're told. But if I don't walk out of here unharmed within an hour—well, have you looked out the window lately?"

The Hierarch pulled in his topmost chin over a descending series of subsidiaries and regarded me from under his brows. He had a thin mouth set between the flat slabs of his cheeks and now the mouth curved up slightly in a grim smile. "So that's what you meant," he said. "You said you'd explain when you saw me."

I blinked stupidly at him. Then I got it. I'd promised to explain in person—and in person I'd led a mob to his door. Oh, I'd been a smart operator, all right. The world lost a military genius when I took up show business.

"Right," I said crisply. "Now let's not waste any more time. Suppose you send for Clia and start things moving. I want the two of us back in New York by the time that hour's up."

"And your—followers?" the Hierarch inquired.

I hesitated briefly. I could say I'd disperse them but would they disperse? They wanted me as a leader or at least a figurehead, not as a vanishing image on a screen headed back for Manhattan.

"I'll manage them," I told the Hierarch. "Send for Clia."

He regarded me with his usual lack of expression for a painful thirty seconds. Then he snapped his fat fingers again. The priest responsible for finger-snaps hesitated uncertainly, not sure what the boss meant.

"Clia!" the Hierarch said venomously over his golden shoulder. The priest cringed and scuttled for the nearest door.

I let out a long breath unobtrusively, hoping nobody would notice. It didn't seem possible that I was going to win. I had only been certain that when you deal with a human juggernaut like this one you've got to bully louder and faster than he does or you'll be trampled under. It appeared to be working but I didn't dare relax for a second and I had one insoluble problem still before me.

Suppose everything went fine up to the very point of my exit through the screen. The Hierarch was no fool. He would not allow himself to be left holding a bag containing a crowd that numbered some thousands. How could he explain my absence when they began to tear down the Temple wall to get at me? Did he simply mean to blast them out of existence with a miracle? If so, why wait? Why not do it now and then dispose of me by the same easy method?

If he had really given in to me, then it had to mean he was afraid of the

crowd. Coriole had told me about the priesthood's very real fear of the people when they were roused. Lorna wouldn't have been allowed to survive if the voice of the people hadn't demanded her, remembering Jimmerton. Now they demanded me and I thought the Hierarch didn't dare refuse them or attack them. He could wipe out this mob, certainly, but Malesco was a big place and short of depopulating the planet it would seem he couldn't control the people when they got their temper up.

It also occurred to me as a sort of paradox, that a miracle exercised to disperse the crowd now might have exactly the opposite effect. The survivors, in their present mood of intellectual curiosity, might become violently active to find out what made the miracle work. I pictured something like a large cannon pouring out miraculous death-rays, while indefatigably curious men and woman swarmed all over it poking, prying, peering into the muzzle, turning any available wheels and chattering excitedly about miracle-juice and the result of sparks

It was at this point I experienced my first real twinge about the people of Malesco. Up to now they had been people in the abstract, a generalization that meant nothing. If Coriole told the truth, they were a downtrodden populace who had allowed a series of tyrants to dominate them for a long, long time.

I was facing the latest of the tyrants now, and I began to realize what it would be like to live as one of the common herd under a Hierarch. Maybe they did need help, at that. But, I told myself firmly, not from me. It wasn't my problem. I was no Malescan.

I had troubles enough of my own. It was true, of course, that I'd inadvertently led them into something that might turn out dangerously for everybody concerned. That depended on how the Hierarch handled things.

CHAPTER XIV

Stalemate

I HAD used a simple machine and produced a miracle on the street corner, but if the Hierarch tried to produce a miracle to disperse the crowd I thought he would find he had presented them with a mechanism instead. And they'd want to examine the thing and see how it worked.

I didn't *think* he was a fool. It was hard to tell what he was.

At this stage I began to be aware that there was a distant, disagreeable noise coming rapidly closer, audible through one closed door and maybe two. By the look of wincing anticipation on the Hierarch's face I knew he felt about the way I did. You could always hear Lorna Maxwell a good deal further than you could see her.

"What's the idea?" her remote voice was demanding. "Stop shoving, will you? Stand aside, you—let an angel pass. Who do you think you are, anyhow? Oh, stop shoving. I'm coming, I'm coming. Just let me alone."

All this was in mingled English and bad Malescan and was as much a part of Lorna as her own skin. She didn't mean most of it. She could contrive to get shoved in the politest company and the monologue of protest was simply her artless way of being sure people were looking at her when she went by.

The door behind me opened. The Hierarch sighed audibly and Lorna Maxwell swept in, heavily disguised as Clia, the transfigured Malescan.

While she kept her mouth shut, she was a dazzling spectacle. She wore a sort of cloth-of-silver robe, heavily encrusted with the images of lions, eagles and salamanders in jewels which I had no reason to think weren't real. They had improved her figure somewhat—it hadn't needed much. Seeing her clearly for the first time now, I realized how tremendously they had improved her face. She was unmistakably still Lorna but a glorified Lorna, not the commonplace cheaply-pretty little creature I had last seen on Earth. Her face was almost funny it was so beautiful. They'd made her into a collection of clichés.

Her eyes were luminously blue, slickly soulful. Her nose was a delicate masterpiece of modeling. Her mouth—if I had a copy of *Bartlett's Quotations* handy I could tell you all about her mouth—shut. Open, it still looked and sounded just like Lorna's.

She paused at the door, looking at me sharply. It took her a few seconds to identify me. It took a few more seconds

for her to get her ideas about me sorted out. What was in this for Lorna Maxwell?

You could see her doing simple sums inside her head, very fast. Then she made up her mind. She flung both arms wide, the silver sleeves flailing. She tipped her lovely head back, gave a panting breath and cried out in a truly silvery lilt.

"Eddie! Eddie, *darling!*"

And with a rush of glittering robes and a sweep of shining perfumed hair she was all over me.

There was a confused moment after that. Lorna is heavier than she looks and she literally flung herself into my arms. It would have been more romantic if we'd rehearsed it better.

I tripped over the silver robe trying to get my balance and we almost sprawled at the Hierarch's feet. Lorna had a tight grip around my neck and was sobbing in my ear some lines from a play I dimly remembered, something about love and reunion and bitter heartbreak.

When I got her at arms' length so I could see her face I noticed she was keeping an eye on the Hierarch as she went through her act, just to make sure all this was being appreciated. Lorna is, of course, one of those persons who never really enjoys an emotion that isn't fully public.

"All right, Clia," the Hierarch rumbled patiently, after a moment. "I take it you know this man. He tells me he's come to take you back to New York."

Lorna eyed me without turning her head. I realized she had her better profile turned toward the Hierarch and didn't want to spoil the pose though for all the good it did her she needn't have bothered. The Hierarch at least was not entrapped by the fatal charms his priesthood had bestowed on the visitor from Paradise.

After a certain amount of thought had passed rapidly through her mind Lorna gave a sudden squeal and swung around to give me personally the benefit of a really dazzling three-quarter view. It was wasted on me too but I could see what an effect she might have on those who didn't know her.

"Eddie, you *didn't!*" she cried. "Really, did you come all this way just to take me home? Oh, Eddie, I've missed you terribly. I—"

I gave her a shake.

"This is Eddie Burton, remember?" I said. "I'm not a Hollywood scout. I'm just good old Eddie. Do you really want to go back?" I spoke in English and the Hierarch scowled at us.

"I certainly do," Lorna assured me, smiling a glistening smile that revealed every tooth in her head. It was clear that they'd cured her of her phobia about the machine, at any rate.

"Tired of being an angel?" I inquired curiously.

"Bored to death. Oh, it's been fun, but they never let me out of the Temple. I want to go back and show myself off. Oh Eddie, didn't they make me *beautiful?*"

"They certainly did. You ought to get a Hollywood contract out of this, once you're back. How does it feel to be beautiful?"

SHE smiled at me with sudden unexpected humility, a sudden look of clumsiness and uncertainty, like a girl dressed up in finery she knows isn't her own. Dimly Lorna knew this face was too good for her, and she felt self-conscious about it.

I was sorry for her expectedly, seeing the old Lorna under this lovely facade, uncertain, noisy, burning with ambition, terrified of failure and starving for success. Well, this time she ought to get it.

"We're on our way back right now," I told her rather grandly, and in Malescan for the Hierarch's benefit. I hoped it was the truth. It worried me that I seemed to be getting away so easily with my bluff but I didn't dare relax for an instant.

It was ominous in a way that no questions had been asked about how I got through into Malesco, what I'd been doing in that room at the Baths, how it happened that I spoke Malescan intelligibly if not perfectly, above all how I'd managed to call up that crowd—and why.

The Hierarch stood there, looking at me, with Lorna striking attitudes in my arms. He puffed out his slablike cheeks a couple of times, sighed and said, "You think so, do you?"

There was the soft sound of finger-snapping and right then I stopped worrying about one thing—getting away with my bluff so easily.

I stopped worrying because there was a sudden downward blur past my eyes

and a tight, silky noose closed violently around my chest and arms. I felt the slam against my spine of a fist tightening the knot at my back.

At the same moment something equally tight around my ankles almost threw me off my balance. My worry about getting away with anything ceased abruptly. I wasn't getting away with a thing—not any more.

Lorna's great luminous blue eyes grew very wide. I could see the whites all round them for a moment as she stared over my shoulder. I turned my head and found myself looking upward into a face about a foot above my own. An enormous priest was holding the rope around my arms.

Slightly behind him stood another giant with a rope-end in his hands. The other end trailed downward to my ankles. A slight pull would throw me flat. I didn't see the least point in putting up a struggle. Either of these Goliaths could have pulled my head off with a flick of the wrist.

I couldn't do a thing except keep my face immobile and try not to irritate these giants into going any farther. I could only maintain dignity by being strong and silent. So I dropped my arms straight from the elbow, where the rope held them to my sides. I motioned the gaping Lorna away and regarded the Hierarch with a calm, heroic gaze.

He was permitting himself a slight smug twitch of the lips as he looked at me. "Search him," he said briefly.

A swarm of priests descended on me from some region I could not see because my back was toward the door. I felt hands slapping cautiously all over me, searching for the unfamiliar pockets of my exotic tweeds. They were thorough.

On the hideous golden desk beside the Hierarch a little heap of my belongings grew like magic. Every item was regarded with deep suspicion and handled with extreme care, particularly the cigarette lighter with which I had kindled that Promethian fire on the street corner.

Finally I stood there with all my pockets hanging wrong-side-out and no further possessions on my person anywhere. I saw the Hierarch regarding Lorna with quiet satisfaction and I realized then why he'd waited until she came before he cracked down on me. He wanted her to observe his power. Nobody was going to bluff the Hierarch, not even a visitant from Paradise, and he wanted the other visitant to know it.

"Now," the Hierarch said comfortably, "we can talk." He moved with ponderous deliberation around the desk and sat down, stirring the pile of small change from my pocket with a forefinger. He looked at me with his impassive all-knowing stare.

"You have come here," he said to me coldly, "without invitation. You cause a great deal of trouble out of motives I'm not really interested in. I know as much about you as I need to know Things in Malesco were going along very smoothly until you came and I intend you to leave them just as smooth before you go."

I looked at him hopefully. So I was to go, was I? Where? I didn't ask.

"I know the method of your coming," he went on complacently. "Falvi will be properly disciplined for tampering with the Earth-Gates and for failing to report your arrival. It *was* Falvi, wasn't it?"

I maintained my look of impassive heroic calm.

"All right," the Hierarch said. "You were seen to emerge from a room you could not have entered except by the Earth-Gates a moment after Falvi had left it. You were assisted down a shaft which was obviously unfamiliar to you.

"You followed Falvi to the Baths. There you spent some while in conference with a notorious rabble-rouser. When detected tampering with a Holy Screen you were able to impress certain of my people with your threats and I allowed you a certain latitude just to see what your plans were."

He interlaced his thick fingers and looked at them with modest pride. "The wisdom of my policy," he went on in a fat voice, "is now clear."

I doubted that. He was probably saying it to impress his audience but there was still a crowd outside waiting for me and he couldn't argue it away. I believed I'd really succeeded in the major part of my bluff. He'd let me get away with so much because he was really baffled.

I knew more than I ought to know and he couldn't be sure where my knowledge stopped. Certainly it had been a mistake to let the crowd move on the Temple. He'd have dispersed them long ago if he dared. I was arguing myself into fresh confidence. I thought I'd better

speak before it could wane again.

"The wisdom of your policy," I said with heavy irony, "will tell you to send Lorna and me back to New York before that hour the crowd gave you is over. They won't want to see any ropes on me either. An hour isn't very long for everything that's got to be done, is it? Time's getting short."

HE FROWNED plumply at me. He hated to make any concessions. It occurred to me then that he was suffering from a form of *hubris*, something I dimly remembered defined in Plato's *Laws*. The sin against proportion had been committed here and the Hierarchs of Malesco wielded powers too big for their souls.

So they suffered congenitally, I suspected, from *hubris*, which is misbehavior through pride. This man before me would, of course, have been somewhat more than human if he hadn't developed a certain amount of that sin, since he ruled a world. The office he occupied was two thousand years old and creaking with an overload of accumulated grandeur.

Undoubtedly he was making the other classic mistake of confusing himself with his office. He arrogated to himself personally all the glory that belonged to the office of Hierarch. He was, in a word, vainglorious. Orgulous is the expressive medieval word for it.

He scowled at me blackly. It went hard with him to have to back down even by implication. But there was that crowd outside which he hadn't dealt with yet. I could almost see him remembering it. So he snapped his fingers again reluctantly.

I felt the pressure of my ropes slacken. They fell in two loose loops to my feet and I stepped out of them without even looking down.

"You'll do as you're told," he said, just to make clear he wasn't conceding anything. "It isn't that easy. You're right to rely on your mob—but don't rely too much. I can always disperse them if they push me too far. I'd prefer not to, but it's within my power to do so. I'll refrain only so long as it's more convenient to refrain. Do you understand that?"

"I see what you mean," I said.

"Very well. You and Clia will return to Paradise. A public ceremony is being organized now for that purpose. You may go on one condition." He exhaled loudly through his nose.

"On one condition," he repeated. "That is that you address the crowd before you go. A short speech is being prepared for you. The people must be instructed to disperse quietly. They must be told they have sinned in allowing the fatal treason of curiosity to overcome them. The Great Alchemist is displeased with them all.

"That must be made clear. A few moral truths about obeying the priesthood and doubling their contributions to the Temple as a sign of true repentance will be incorporated in your speech. After that I believe they'll go quietly."

I looked at him thoughtfully. Maybe they would. I couldn't be sure but I rather felt they would. It was clever of the Hierarch. Certainly it put Coriole right back in his place. He had tried to crowd me into a position of public savior which I wasn't at all ready to assume. This was the only way I could think of that would get me out of it.

But it made me feel very uncomfortable.

Nobody could say I'd encouraged all those people to stick their necks out by following me to the Temple. I'd done everything I could to get rid of them. True, now they were here they were very useful but I hadn't asked them to follow me.

I didn't owe them anything. I'd been deftly maneuvered into this spot and, if I could be maneuvered out again, that was a matter between Coriole and the Hierarch. I was just a tool and it suited me fine.

Then I remembered Uncle Jim and my discomfort deepened. When you came right down to it this is what Uncle Jim had done too. Pitched into Malesco unintentionally, he had accumulated a band of followers, taken on hostages to fortune—at least I'd managed to avoid that—and eventually deserted when things became more rugged than he could take. Now the pattern was repeating itself.

"You have no choice, of course," the Hierarch put in neatly at this point. "Your refusal would simply mean the deaths of the people. I'd rather not wipe out your misguided followers but if I must I can. Remember, this is my world, not yours. I rule Malesco."

He pulled in his chins and gave me

an orgulous look. I shrugged. He was perfectly right. It *was* his world. I didn't want Malesco. All I wanted was to get back to New York with Lorna. And this was the easiest way to do it.

"It's the people's problem," I assured myself. "They haven't any right to expect some magic deliverer from another world to turn up and solve everything for them. If I lay an easy solution in their laps they won't value it. You've got to work out your own problems before you get any good from them. That's one of the first lessons in life."

"If you have any notions," the Hierarch said at this point, "that you can burst into inspired speech at the last moment, please forget them."

I blinked at him. That hadn't occurred to me. He was overestimating my concern for the people of Malesco.

"Remember I control all the mechanistic resources of this world," he reminded me. "The people can't possibly overthrow me. It's no kindness to encourage them to try. Surely you can see that."

I did, all right. I glanced at Lorna, who had been unexpectedly silent. She wasn't following the conversation at all. From the moment she saw a pack of cigarettes emerge from my pocket it was clear that one devouring desire had taken control of her. But she seemed to be too afraid of the Hierarch to say anything. There was no help to be gained from her. She didn't even know what we were saying.

I sighed uncomfortably. "All right," I said. "Let's get started. I'll make your speech for you." And I began stuffing my empty pockets back into place to give myself something to do.

CHAPTER XV

Command Performance

I STOOD on the stage of the biggest theatre I'd ever played in and got ready for the largest audience. The average legitimate theatre in New York is a tiny place and it holds comparatively few people at a time.

But this vast, long chamber with the painted walls would more than contain the crowd I had left in the square before the Temple. I shuffled my feet on the golden stage and wished the ordeal were over.

Lorna was beside me, making nervous adjustments of her robes. The Hierarch sat on a hideous gold throne, even more encrusted with ornament than his desk upstairs. There were priests and priests and more priests everywhere I looked, but the people hadn't come in yet. The doors were closed.

This was the dais below the great circular screen that opened upon Earth. It was just a window now. Through it I could see over the rooftops the great watery dome of the Baths with the fountains of fire playing over it and Lorna's pictured face painted in colored lights on the side of the building.

It was the same view I'd had from far above when I first emerged into Malesco. I never understood clearly how they switched the opening between the worlds from upstairs to the ground floor for ceremonies—but that was the way it was.

Upstairs it was privately operated and constantly attended by people like Falvi. Down here it worked only on great occasions—like this one. Of course no great mystery was involved—we use remote control and coaxial cables and such gimmicks ourselves and in the face of such a miracle as the Earth-Gates merely technical angles were trivial enough.

I'd spent the last half hour or so cramming, studying my part with the aid of two priests who acted as prompters. It wasn't a difficult role to learn. In fact, I'd had time to ask a few tentative questions about the Earth-Gates, for I had a pardonable curiosity as to the nature of the springboard that was going to hurl me into a pretty frightening abyss.

To my surprise the priests had answered my qustions—not as clearly as I could have wished but I managed to piece out some interesting details. I began to understand why it was that Malesco had discovered the Earth-Gates whereas our own scientists have merely theorized about such matters.

The reason was simply that alchemy accepts the idea of transmutation in a semi-mystical way which is nevertheless founded on solid physical science. Belief precedes practical application in spite of Newton and the apple.

Before Newton men knew enough to

get out from under but the theory of gravitation enabled men to go on from there and create rather than merely to use what was already at hand. However, not until certain alloys, methods and isotopes were discovered was Malesco able to build the Earth-Gates.

We use energy to move ourselves from place to place. With kinetic energy we travel far and fast. But there is another method—potential energy. We use that when we build a bridge. The bridge must be constructed in a special way so it won't fall down. It must be made of special material strong enough to endure the stresses and strains. The Romans used stone. They couldn't have bridged San Francisco Bay. We use metal alloys so we can do that.

Now sometimes kinetic and potential energy are joined in one bridge—a drawbridge.

The Malescan apparatus to bridge the gap between two worlds was similar. Cathode and anode may be solid metal but what jumps between is pure energy, electronic in nature. So the Earth-Gates were part kinetic and part potential.

When you get into the theory of probability you start working with its breakdown within the atom. So far our own science has been puzzled by this, rather as the experts of Galileo's time were baffled when two balls, one of wood and one of iron, were dropped from the top of a tower and behaved irrationally in the light of the known science of that period.

Anyhow, Malescan alchemic scientists had also noticed a breakdown of probabilities within *their* atoms. Remember, they knew all about earth, and the space-time cleavage back in Roman days. They thought this might be the key. Somewhere within the atom was the missing link. Somewhere, solidly in Malesco—somewhere, solidly on earth, were cathode and anode.

The trick was to find a form of energy that would bridge the widening gap.

Well, they did it. It took a long time but they did it. They discovered atomic energy eventually and then managed to find the right type of energy to bridge the gap. Oddly enough, that wasn't the hardest part.

The really tricky work—my priests explained—came, first in building up enough sufficient potential to cross the gulf, secondly in controlling and guiding that enormous power. (Remember the atomic bomb? We *invented* it all right but as for *controlling* it—)

Moreover the powers involved were so enormous that sometimes the Earth-Gates got slightly out of control. The spark would jump the gap of its own volition and the two worlds would meet briefly—for a second or two—with only a few square feet of space involved. The gaps always closed again.

Still, this is what must have happened when I entered Malesco. There must have been a brief bridging of the gap, so that when I called Lorna's name Falvi heard a voice from the air and, sensibly connecting that phenomenon with the Earth-Gates, let his fatal curiosity get the better of him. Perhaps that explains Joan of Arc's voices too.

BECAUSE legend had it that such phenomena had happened even before the Earth-Gates were built. Perhaps the two worlds were closer together then, so the gulf could be bridged more easily. A visitant from an unknown place had appeared once in Malesco—his name was something very much like Peter Rugg.

And there was the tale of the Malescan who had disappeared without trace from the middle of an open field. (Would it surprise you to know that I finally worked it out that his name, spoken phonetically, resembled Kaspar Hauser?)

I wish now I had asked more questions. I wish the priests had been clearer. For the Earth-Gates were among the great miracles of science and I couldn't concentrate on them at all because I had stage fright.

I stood waiting, facing the far end of the enormous room, wondering where the entrance was to outside, running over my opening lines, wishing again and again that the next half hour were over, that Lorna and I were back home again. Then the air suddenly shuddered with the hollow hooting of trumpets and the whole far end of the room shimmered before me.

I thought it was my eyes blurring. Then I saw that the entire end wall had grown translucent with a pouring flood of pale light. A vast A began to burn upon the surface of the wall and I realized that it was no wall but a great curtain.

It shivered and began to rise. The trumpets tooted their hollow notes again and a second curtain rose, lead-gray, to reveal a third and then a fourth beyond, successively thinner and more golden. Now I could see a dim outline of the square in which I had left my faithful followers.

But the curtains distorted things. It looked as if the whole square, which had been half empty when I left, were full now of restless motion. I had thought the crowd would, if anything, thin out a little while it waited. I had even braced myself to find it entirely dispersed by the time I got to relying really heavily on the people. But Coriole had been smarter than I expected.

The last curtain rolled upward, pure golden yellow, and from the dais where I stood I could see that the entire square was one solid, seething mass of heads and faces turned toward me. And that wasn't all.

As far as the eye could reach down the streets leading into the square there were more heads, more faces, more restless pushing and surging. It looked as if all of Malesco had gathered here to send me off with appropriate ceremony. You couldn't see the pavement anywhere the crowd was packed so tight.

When the curtain rose the foremost ranks rolled forward in one solid mass and the noise of it surged into the Temple and reverberated from the walls. They weren't shouting. They didn't make any particular noises when they saw me.

I'd rather expected some sort of demonstration but I didn't get it. The volume of their voices rose a little but each individual man and woman was talking in low controlled tones and there was no shouting. It seemed to me that this crowd meant business.

It scared me. Could I handle it? Could the Hierarch? I didn't know what weapons he had but it looked to me that nothing short of an atom blast could wipe out this entire mob at one blow. He could, at worst, destroy the foremost.

It seemed to me those endless ranks of people disappearing down the streets far away could and would surge forward and find and destroy the sources of the destruction before the last man was anywhere near extinction. I didn't look around at the Hierarch but I felt a little cool breath of—dismay?—move over the dais as the priesthood prepared to greet its audience.

In less time than I'd have believed the hall was packed tight and solid with men and women shoulder to shoulder, staring up at the dais and at me. And with them came a curious atmosphere of tension and expectation, so that the enclosing walls seemed to pack the feeling down tight under the high roof and we all felt it pressing around us.

Down there in the front ranks I saw one familiar face—Coriole's.

He was only about twenty feet away from me and he was watching me like a cat, his pale blue eyes never swerving from mine. It made me uncomfortable. I looked away—and found I was staring at another familiar face, this time in the wings and even closer than Coriole. This time it was Dio.

He still looked sleepy. He still had the air of a man who's had a hard night and not enough rest. But there was a lot more in his expression now. Sullenness, I thought, for one thing. I had a series of quick consecutive thoughts about Dio.

There just hadn't been time until now to wonder where the Hierarch got his detailed information about my activities since my arrival here but it was obvious when I thought back. Dio, of course—he had probably been hanging around Falvi's door hoping for a break and had got one.

Maybe he'd suspected Falvi's connection with the underground for some while and had caught him at it finally with me. That would explain his air of avid anticipation when he carried me down the shaft and set me adrift in the city, hoping I'd lead him to something worth while.

THAT was Dio's policy, of course. Coriole had confirmed it if I'd needed confirmation. Dio was on Dio's side and nobody else's. And now he was sullen. Why? Well, he'd given the Hierarch some valuable information, certainly. But what reward had he got? Not enough, to judge by his expression.

He hadn't even been inside the Hierarch's door when I went to pay my formal call. He'd been hanging around in the hall, hoping for crumbs. It wasn't enough for Dio—not nearly enough. I wondered about promotion in the priesthood. Maybe it went by seniority. Dio was young. He wouldn't be content to

wait another fifty years for recognition. He'd want it now.

Since his scheme to inform the Hierarch on Coriole had failed he'd certainly be watching for something even bigger. I didn't like having him so close to me. I meant to play right along with the Hierarch, of course—I hadn't any choice now—but if I should see any loopholes I didn't want Dio watching me with that expectant stare, waiting to jump the moment my back was turned.

There was a low rumbling along the walls. I looked up. So did everybody else. And this time a single deep breath of protest seemed to sweep the whole hall, from side to packed side. For above us, between the painted animals on the walls, were regularly spaced Golden A's. There was an ominous glow dawning behind them.

I recognized it with a shudder. It was the same glow I had last seen in the bottle-shaped weapons of the priests. My eyes ached in quick retrospect as I thought of the blinding sunburs of heat and brilliance those weapons could emit.

But those had been of milk-bottle size. These were six feet across. The golden A's were simply ornamental scrollwork across the mouths of so many cannon embedded in the wall. The Hierarch was taking no chances with this dangerous crowd. One simultaneous glare from those glowing mouths above us would crisp every human in the hall to cinders.

I hoped—not at all like a hero—that the priests had some way to shut off the dais from those blasts if and when the time came to unleash them.

Still there was no demonstration from the crowd. They weren't intimidated. They weren't even angry on the surface. But they were waiting. The thousands of lifted faces I could see had a grim set look and I could feel in the air that indefinable tension of determination and hard controlled patience. Every eye was on me.

My speech was short. I'd learned it easily enough. The notes were on a little glass and gold table before me. I went over the opening lines in a quick mental gabble, waiting for my cue.

"People of Malesco—gabble gabble—great Alchemist in Paradise is impatient with your sinful curiosity—gabble gabble—sent me to warn you—gabble-gabble—as punishment for your wilful misconduct — gabble-gabble — returning to Paradise and taking Clia back with me out of the contaminating—gabble-gabble—"

There it was, the deep hooting of those great curled horns. A breathless hush fell upon the crowd. I knew I'd never have such an audience again. They were with me to a man. They loved me in Malesco. Well, it ought to be over in ten minutes.

"It's not your battle, Eddie," I assured myself, waiting for the horns to stop echoing. "You're just an actor. You've played villains before. This is a quick walk-on and then curtain. In ten minutes you'll be home in New York and these people can fight it out among themselves."

The echoes stopped. I took a deep breath and started talking. My voice was a little shaky at first but I got it under control after the first words. The public address system here was working fine. They could hear me, I saw, even in the back rows.

I got past "Great Alchemist in Paradise" and swung into it, putting paternal reproof into the lines, trying to sink myself in the character I was playing so I wouldn't have to think. I hadn't written this play. It wasn't my battle. It wasn't my battle. It wasn't—

It wasn't going over.

There was no doubt about that. The muttering from the back of the house began to rise before I'd got more than two lines into my speech. I spread my arms and put more volume into my voice, ad-libbing a little to make time for the mutter to subside.

It worked—for a moment—and I went on with increasingly cold feet. I didn't like it. I didn't like it at all. I didn't like my lines or the part I was playing and it seemed to me the Hierarch had made a terrible mistake in his handling of the crowd.

It's simple psychology. You can't take something away from people when they prize it very highly and not give them anything in return. These men and women had come here charged with a tremendous potential for action and it wasn't going to work if we just said, "Run along home now like good children."

I had misjudged the Hierarch. He knew what he was doing.

The second time the muttering from below rose to a roar that threatened to

drown out my speech I felt a stirring at my elbow. I stepped back a pace, drawing out a syllable long enough to give me time to glance back.

CHAPTER XVI

It Is My Fight

IT WAS Lorna.

She came forward with a graceful, gliding step she certainly hadn't known in New York. She spread her arms and the silver sleeves caught the light and glowed like fire. She spoke in a cooing emotional croon that filled the hall without effort.

"You are angry," she cooed at them, in the purest Malescan. "You have reason to be angry. Someone has cheated you of your rights!" Silvery indignation sounded in her voice now. I was baffled for an instant at the command she had over the language and her lines. Lorna wasn't up to ad-libbing.

Then I realized the Hierarch had been preparing for this all along. I hadn't been the only one who spent the last half hour studying my lines. Lorna had been coached too for just this occasion.

The crowd was dead silent, waiting, puzzled. I was puzzled too. But in the instant before Lorna went on I saw understanding light up one face below me in the crowd. Coriole's eyes met mine in a sudden blaze of anger and hatred. He knew what was coming. And then, of course, I did too.

It had been the Hierarch's plan from the start. But he hadn't told me. He must have known how far he could push me along the way he meant me to go. I'd agreed to make this fairly harmless little speech. But he suspected I wouldn't do what Lorna was now doing for me.

"A man who deserves your righteous anger!" Lorna cried throatily. "He and his men have worked like serpents underground to make trouble between you and your loving priesthood. He is jealous of your destiny. You will go on through virtuous lives to reincarnation in Paradise.

"But he will never reach New York and now he tries to trick you too out of your birthright—Paradise! People of Malesco—I give you that man, to punish as you choose!" The silver-draped arm swung dramatically and pointed straight down before her.

"Coriole!" she shrilled. *"Coriole!"*

Instantly from picked spots in the crowd a well-disciplined claque took up the shout. The Hierarch hadn't forgotten a thing. His stooges were planted all through the room and they had strong voices.

"Coriole!" they yelled with well-assumed rage. "Coriole tricked us! Grab him! Grab Coriole! Don't let him get away!"

The crowd boiled furiously, wild with indecision. Above them the golden A's glowed more and more ominously as the power stepped up behind them, waiting to be released.

"Get Coriole!" some feeble voices began to cry tentatively, as suggestibles in the crowd swung toward the people who made the most noise. "Get him—get Coriole!"

The thing hung in a perfect balance for one of those timeless moments. It needed a push one way or the other and for that instant nobody seemed capable of pushing. Time was on the side of the Hierarch.

When you have an organized group acting under strict orders it's simply a matter of time until they swing the crowd their way by pure volume of noise. And Coriole for some reason was caught flatfooted.

Either he'd relied too heavily on me or the unexpected size of the crowd had given him false confidence. But it was partly the size of the crowd that trapped him now. He was hemmed in so tightly he couldn't run even if he wanted to. I saw his mouth open and shut and the veins in his neck swell as he shouted something—perhaps the names of his friends—but the noise was too loud and nobody could hear him.

There's always a large percentage of mindless fools in any mob, ready to yell whatever the next guy is yelling. The Hierarch's boys were making headway. Probably a good many of these people had never heard of Coriole but that didn't stop them from yapping for his blood.

I stood there on the dais and dithered like my cousin in the crowd. "It isn't your fight, it isn't your fight," I kept telling myself futilely. "This is the people against their government and there isn't a thing you can do about it. Don't

meddle. Keep your mouth shut and you'll come out on top. Keep your mouth shut!"

Here on the dais a separate crisis seemed in progress. The roaring mob below us and the jammed square outside and the shouting and yelling which by infection was sweeping back out of the Temple and along the packed streets. But it might have been happening on the other side of the world so far as it outwardly seemed to affect the priests.

THE Hierarch sat motionless on his gold-crusted throne. Lorna, having spoken her piece, had sidled up to me and was whispering urgently, "Did you keep any cigarettes, Eddie?"

I didn't answer her. I was watching the priests. They weren't as good at hiding their emotions as the Hierarch was. A lot of ambivalence seemed to be in progress in the massed priesthood in the wings. The men wound up in the curled horns each had a deep breath drawn, ready to blast away at a word from the Hierarch.

They never took their eyes from his face. I knew there were hidden priests at the controls of the sunburst weapons glowing ready in the walls, and they must be watching the boss too, each with a finger poised above the switch of whatever activated those heat-rays.

It seemed to me the priests were alarmed somewhat out of proportion to reason. I saw they were winning. All they had to do was wait. Already the roar of "Get Coriole!" could be heard clearly from several sides and it was gaining with every second.

Then I caught Dio's eye and for an instant everything else went blank and silent around me, so urgent was the look on his face. But I didn't know what the look meant. He seemed to be hanging eagerly on my next motion, my next word. He seemed to attach tremendous importance to what I did next.

There was the same avid anticipation on his face which I'd seen in our first meeting when he waited joyfully for me to give myself away. Was that what he expected now? Was he afraid I'd try to swerve the anger of the mob from Coriole to the priests? Did he think I could do it? If he did, maybe he was right. Maybe, if I could just think of the right word, Coriole might still have a chance.

But did I want to meddle that much? I'd gone through a lot to get right where I was now, on the threshold of return to New York. In a few moments Coriole would be submerged by the angry mob, all its energy diverted against the man who's roused it. And the ceremony would go on as planned.

Dio was reaching into his robe. I saw him fumble for something, never taking his eyes from my face. Then he had it. He pulled it out, keeping his hands closed over something small.

He was smiling rather wolfishly now, the bright avid intentness stronger than ever on his face. He reminded me irresistibly of those weapons glowing in the walls. There was the same leashed blaze, the same menace held barely in check.

Still nailing me with that brilliant unswerving stare, he drew his arm back a little and snapped something shiny through the air straight at me.

It seemed to me it hung there between us for years and years. My mind ran in little circles, yelping hysterically. "Is it a bomb?" my mind demanded. "Shall I catch it? Shall I dodge it? What is it? What's eating him? What shall I do?"

But my body acted with calm independence of the frantic mind. Automatically both of my hands reached out and the object smacked neatly into them.

It was a small, flat, square. The feel of it made a picture take shape in my mind before I even looked. Another of those white wafers with gold writing on it. A message from Dio?

I opened my hands slightly and looked down. It wasn't a wafer. There was no writing on it.

Dio had tossed me my cigarette lighter.

YOU wouldn't believe what a short time all this really took. Coriole was still looking around wildly for his men. The mob was still milling indecisively. The leather-lunged stooges in the congregation were still bellowing incendiary phrases at the tops of their voices. But the tide was already on the turn.

The priests, I thought, had won. Not tangibly yet but definitely. This was one of those important moments in Malescan history when a touch would swing the balance one way or the other and the touch had been applied. It was swinging ponderously toward the Hierarch's side.

And the moment was perhaps as great a point of division as that earlier mo-

ment in Roman history when the two worlds had split apart in probability. Everything hung in the balance.

I held the cigarette lighter stupidly in my hands, blinking at it. What did Dio mean? Was he on the side of the priests or the side of the rebels?

"Neither," I told myself rapidly. "Dio's on Dio's side and nobody else's. He's for the winners."

But he'd given me the means to swing the course of history away from his own men. What did it mean? Obviously, only one thing.

Dio thought the rebels were the likelier winners. He wanted in on the stronger side. And that meant the priests were a lot weaker than they looked. Somehow, somewhere, they were covering up with a colossal bluff. Dio knew. And he expected me to—to what?

My mind was still telling me, "Don't meddle! It isn't your battle!" but again my body calmly went its own way. Without the slightest mental processes to guide me I kicked over the gold and glass table beside me on the dais and swung both arms up over my head at full length.

The pages of my speech fluttered unnoticed from the table to the floor. But the noise of the overturned table was a quicker and higher sound than the bellowing of the mob. It caught eyes in the front ranks.

I flicked the lighter with one thumb, praying fervently that it wouldn't choose this moment to balk.

There was a strange breathless pause in the shouting down below. Then I heard the sigh that swept like a soft breeze through the room and I knew the flame had caught.

Miraculously, little by little but marvelously fast, the uproar died away. Out in the square the crowd was still yelling but there was a hush in the painted room. I could hear silence sweeping backward through the streets as the noise had swept a minute or two before.

I stood there like Liberty holding the torch of freedom aloft, and I didn't feel as silly as I might have. I *was* Liberty in that moment and it *was* the torch of freedom—if things went right.

I held the dramatic pose until I was sure every eye had focused on that one small flame, that one-candle-power torch that contained more power than all the Hierarch's weapons. I knew that while I held it the priests wouldn't dare touch me. But what was I going to do next? I couldn't stand forever in this melodramatic attitude.

It was my hour. I *couldn't* do the wrong thing. I snapped the lighter shut, swung my lifted arm back, and hurled the glittering square of metal out over the heads of the crowd.

It turned twice in the air, catching light on its shining sides, and then dropped gently out of sight among the craning heads. There was silence for a moment. Then the crowd seethed around the spot where it had fallen and a shrill voice cried, "I got it! I *got* it!"

Everybody looked. Even the Hierarch leaned forward on his throne. We all saw the meager little half-bald man in the mob who had caught the torch I threw.

He looked like a middle-aged clerk. He wore a shabby tunic and his hair needed cutting, what there was of it. But he held the lighter up in his cupped palms like a holy relic and his insignificant little face was transfigured with rapture.

That was the point at which the Hierarch lost his head. He was a clever man but he didn't know *everything*—and one of the things he didn't know was how to deal with a problem like this, with people getting so riotously out of hand so fast, with everything depending on his decisions from minute to minute, and no past experience to guide him.

This had never happened before. All he had to go by was a time when something a little like it had happened—Jimmerton's coming. The priesthood had triumphed over Jimmerton by fast direct high-pressure methods. The Hierarch tried that now. It would never do to let that dangerous cigarette lighter float about the city, passing from hand to hand and igniting rebellion in all who saw it.

"Bring me the sacred relic," he shouted, making majestic gestures. "That is a relic from Paradise—too holy for human hands! Bring it to me!"

I caught a venomous glance from his small enigmatic eyes but he had no time to waste on me just now. He was rising with great pomp, surging forward across the platform. His outspread arms brushed Lorna and me aside.

"Bring me the relic!" he shouted, making his voice so rich and deep that

even above the clamor of the crowd people heard it and heads turned.

ESPECIALLY his claque planted among the audience heard it. When the command made itself understood I could instantly spot the undercover agents down below. Little eddies of the throng seethed around each as they began to surge toward the spot where the man with the lighter stood.

But they weren't the only ones who heard the orders. All within earshot caught the words and the deep spontaneous growl of anger that rose in the wake of the command must have told the Hierarch instantly he'd made a mistake. He'd started something he couldn't finish without bringing up some heavy artillery—very heavy. Maybe nothing he had was strong enough to silence that angry growling as it grew and spread and strengthened.

The mob was like a single organism now. A word dropped into it spread in eddying rings out and out until it was lost among the vanishing throngs in the streets. An idea, a promise of success or a threat of defeat, seemed to spread in the same way. A few words spoken from the dais ran like magic through the listening crowds and eddied out there among the packed avenues almost quicker than the eye could follow the spreading tumult it made.

One or two of the Hierarch's strong-arm squad had reached the little man with the lighter by now. The others were floundering closer but against increasing opposition. The people around each of them were resisting. Knots of angry men and women came into being all about every one of the forward-surging stooges.

The mob was turning into a single organism and the organism encysted these germs of disease in its midst, isolated them, built up the anger and the strength necessary to control them exactly as a living body surrounds and overwhelms dangerous intruders within itself.

Something that was new and powerful had been born in Malesco—this crowd—this single close-knit unit of all the thousands functioning as one. It was stronger than the Hierarch, stronger than the priesthood.

It was a new being. And I had created it. It was my responsibility now. So it *was* my fight after all.

Dio was watching me with fierce expectancy. Coriole, wedged tightly in the mob twenty feet away, was watching too, his pale eyes unswervingly on mine. I felt a third intentness and glanced sidewise to find the Hierarch regarding me with that inscrutible fat stare of his. These three knew. The next move was probably mine, and they realized it. These three—no, it was four.

For Lorna's newly limpid eyes suddenly intercepted mine. She edged toward me across the platform and I felt her cold fingers clasp my hand. With unerring instinct Lorna Maxwell had spotted the man temporarily in a key position. Whatever there was in it for her she meant to get. She moved toward me with all the mindless assurance of a plant turning toward the sun.

I had no idea what to do next.

CHAPTER XVII

A Chance for Coriole

ABOUT thirty seconds had elapsed since I threw the lighter and already a major battle was starting in the crowd around the little man who had caught it.

"Little Man," I thought bitterly. Not a single cliché was being spared me. Even that nauseating phrase to denote the masses had come into actual being right under my nose. The representative Little Man himself was squealing and struggling feebly for the priceless boon of a cigarette lighter, and I couldn't do a thing to help him. I couldn't—

The sudden tremendous blare of the curled horns stunned me into blankness. Some hidden amplifier must have been turned on, for the whole hall shook with that deep-toned, vibrant blast. The Hierarch had moved while I stood there hesitating.

Down in the crowd all motion ceased for a few seconds as every brain in the mob vibrated painfully to that fearful noise. One vast collective headache must have throbbed through the whole organism which was the Malescan crowd.

The Hierarch's voice, amplified to godlike volume though I could see no mechanism to carry it, rolled majesti-

cally down the hall as the horn blast faded. He wasted no words. He didn't even command them to stop fighting, since obviously they had already stopped for the moment, stunned by the noise of the horns. He went right to the heart of his problem, which was me.

"Paradise," he roared sonorously, "awaits its children. Silence! Let the Earth-Gates open!"

For a second I think nobody quite knew what he meant. We were all too involved in our immediate problems. But then I saw a change come over the faces just below, looking up at us. Their gaze shifted to something behind me. I was aware of a slowly dawning new light on the dais and I saw my own shadow take dim shape and stretch out at my feet across the golden floor.

I turned. The great circular window that normally looked out over the city had clouded with shining opalescence. You couldn't see Malesco through it any more. But a shape was growing there. A vast luminous A, the symbol of divided worlds bridged by a crossbar between Paradise and Malesco, gleamed through the clouds.

Very rapidly the A faded and Paradise itself replaced Malesco beyond the window. New York at night, its streets streaming with lights, appeared to lie some hundreds of feet down just beyond the great circle in the wall.

"Paradise awaits!" the Hierarch's rich bellow announced, still amplified to superhuman volume. "The two who came to us must now return to the glorious rewards of New York. Clia! Burton! The Earth-Gates open!"

Behind me in the hall a wave of silence was moving outward through the crowd, though in the distance I could still hear shouting. Now a new wave began just below me, almost at my heels. I knew it would move as the shouting and the silence had moved, out and out until it reached the limits of the streets. But the new sound was very quiet. It was a sigh, a murmur. There was nothing they could do. They waited.

Was I going to leave them to the mercies of the priesthood as Jimmerton had done? I wished I knew.

The vision of New York rocked before me like a ship and seemed to shoot upward with sickening speed as if all of us who watched were dropping toward the street. And as we dropped the clarity of the view clouded. I could see why.

If this were a real opening between the worlds, not a dressed-up version, it would never do to let the Malescans see too clearly what the real streets were like. Through a golden cloud I saw the blur of passing traffic, their lights making rainbows in the mist. We were looking at street-level straight into the City of Paradise.

"Come," the Hierarch said. "Paradise awaits. The Gates are open. Clia, Burton —farewell!"

All we had to do was step through. It was what I'd been struggling for during all this endless eternity in Malesco. Lorna's hand was still clasping mine. I'd got what I came for. What was in it for me if I hesitated any longer? Nothing.

"Go on," the Hierarch said urgently, in his normal voice, not using the amplifier that would let the people hear. "Step through. You're all right now. Just get out of here and don't make any more trouble."

Still I hesitated. His little eyes between their rims of fat were almost closed as he looked at me. He had never seemed more of a juggernaut than now. I had a curious feeling that this wasn't all, that there was something further on his mind as he waited so impatiently for my next step. But that could all be imagination.

"Go on," he whispered again. "Get out! Or do you want some help?"

I heard the soft snapping of his fingers and a couple of burly priests put their hands together in hieratically pious gestures and came forward on each side of us. I could see perfectly well that we were going to be shoved through the Gates in a minute or two if we didn't go of our own accord.

THE crowd was completely silent now. It didn't seem possible that so many people could stand so still, hardly breathing, waiting to be abandoned to the just punishment of the priesthood. Jimmerton had deserted them too, long ago.

Now I was going, and the Hierarch could hardly wait to get me out of Malesco, so he could arrest Coriole and that ridiculous Little Man and put my cigarette lighter with the other relics of Paradise. Then it would be treason again for anyone to think about how the little

wheel went around and the sparks flew out.

And, I thought suddenly, maybe someday another man from New York would stumble through the Earth-Gates. Maybe somebody not yet born. What story would he hear from the descendants of these people, about how a man named Jimmerton and a man named Burton had led them into revolt and left them when the going got tough?

Don't make any mistakes about Eddie Burton. That's sentimental talk. My own skin is the most important thing in the world to me. But if I could save Lorna and myself and still have some little dividend of glory left over, that wouldn't be too bad, either.

"Farewell!" the Hierarch suddenly thundered with full volume turned on. *"Farewell!"*

I heard his fingers snap again and the two bulky priests ceased making hieratic gestures long enough to take each of us by an arm and move us at a sort of stately trot toward the Gates.

At that moment, almost too late, I knew what I could do to collect on that dividend of glory.

"Wait!" I said. "Just a second— I forgot something."

The priests paused slightly to see what the Hierarch would say to this. He looked at me very sharply and I saw no relenting on his face. He knew when he was well off. He wasn't going to give me a chance to get him into any more trouble.

And besides, there was something curious about his face and his eyes—a sort of gleam as if this weren't quite all, as if he waited for something yet to come. Coriole's arrest? Dio's punishment? Exterminating the crowd? All of those and maybe something more. I hadn't time to think about it.

"Lorna," I said rapidly and softly in English. "Have you got your amplifier turned on? I want you to say something to the crowd. Quick!"

She said in a sort of musical whine, "Oh, Eddie, I don't want to! Let's go! I—"

There was no time to waste persuading her. I got a good grip on her hand and bent her little finger painfully outward. I'd rather have twisted her arm but that would have showed too clearly.

"Does that hurt?" I demanded in a rapid mutter. "I'll dislocate it if you don't repeat what I say after me at full volume. Understand?"

All I got in reply was a squeal of pain and anger. I paid no attention. She was trying to squirm free but the priest on her far side had a firm hold on her and didn't understand why she was struggling so suddenly. Between us we had her where she couldn't get away.

"Say *People of Malesco,"* I commanded, giving her the Malescan for it. "Go on, before I pull your finger off. *People of Malesco!"*

"People of Malesco!" she cried furiously, and the volume of the sound roaring from her throat so near me was almost deafening. I wondered where the amplifier was—in a tooth somewhere? *"People of Malesco!"*

The priests jumped slightly at the roar. The screen before us vibrated a little and the sound woke echoes in the vault of the roof over the dais. Lorna's back was to the crowd but they must have heard her speak clear out in the streets.

The Hierarch give us both a look of pure venom. But he had to give in. He made a gesture and the grip on my arm slackened. Still holding Lorna's hand in my compelling clutch, I swung her around to face the crowd.

"I have one last message for you," I dictated.

LORNA swore at me in a whisper and then rolled the Malescan words out in the rich, sonorously sweet voice they'd given her along with the lovely face.

"Your Hierarch is a great man," I said, releasing her finger slightly. She put such emotion in the transcript when she repeated it that a very convincing half-sob broke up the words a little. It was a sound of rage and pain but it gave the speech a touching quality.

"He has done so much for Malesco," I dictated.

"Let me go!" Lorna whispered. *"He has done so much for Malesco—"*

"That Paradise has decreed him a reward."

"Eddie, I'll kill you! Let go. Let go! *That Paradise has decreed him a reward—"*

"Listen while I tell you," I whispered. *"Listen well, for this is the greatest reward a living man ever knew. Do you hear me, people of Malesco?"*

Between snarls of rage she got the words out. I made her pause then and in the interval the people gave us one unified roar of answer. They were with us. They knew something was up and I thought they were ready to back almost anything I said, because what did they have to lose now?

"I was a mortal among you," I dictated, ignoring her snarls. *"I lived a good life and went straight to New York when I died. But your Hierarch has lived a life so good that the Great Alchemist sent me here to claim him for Paradise —now!"*

Halfway through that speech Lorna stopped struggling. Evidently she had picked up enough Malescan to realize what she was saying. She rolled her eyes at me. "I hope you know what you're doing," she whispered in the pause that followed this speech.

"Shut up," I said. "Wait a second. Let them yell. See how they like it?" I was looking straight down at Coriole as I spoke and I saw the sudden blaze of excitement on his face as he realized what I was attempting.

"Your Hierarch returns to Paradise with me—now!" Lorna parroted after me. And then, in a whisper, "Oh, Eddie, do you think he'll go? You must be crazy. What'll we do with him in New York?"

"Shut up," I said again. "Go on—make a gesture toward him. Invite him to Paradise. Go on or I'll break your arm!"

With incomparable grace she held out her hand toward the Hierarch, her silver sleeve flowing and flashing with jewels. There was a good deal of ham in her acting but the audience wasn't critical.

The Hierarch stood there stunned at the foot of his golden throne. The entire priesthood stood stunned around him. Nobody had expected this. For an instant stillness and silence held everybody on the dais motionless.

"Say, *Come, Paradise awaits us,"* I hissed.

"Come, Paradise awaits us," Lorna cooed and the volume of her coo filled the entire hall and echoed through the city outside.

The Hierarch's eyes met mine. He shook his fat shoulders a little and said in a low growl several phrases of Malescan that Uncle Jim had never taught me. But he came. He had no choice. He couldn't repudiate Lorna before everybody. Slowly he lumbered toward us, juggernaut to the last.

The overturned table was in the way, and he rolled forward, ignoring it, knowing somebody would snatch it out of his path. Somebody did. He didn't glance down. You could see the furious thoughts racing through his mind behind his frozen face but it was quite clear that he didn't know what to do next.

I did. It seemed perfectly simple to me. I was giving Coriole the chance he'd begged for. Coriole had friends among the priesthood and those friends were organized. I thought that if the Hierarch were suddenly snatched away Coriole would have a good chance of seizing control and putting one of his boys on that hideous golden throne. It was all I could do for him. I thought it was pretty good myself.

CHAPTER XVIII

Home to Paradise

WE made a little tableau before the glowing Earth-Gates. Lorna and I, with our priest escort on each side, ready to seize us again at a word from the Hierarch—and the Hierarch in all his pomp and power, entirely helpless to save himself. It was a fine moment. I felt very proud of my own cleverness.

The Hierarch shook himself again, growled deep in his throat, and spoke at about half volume, so that the crowd heard him clearly but not deafeningly.

"I am not worthy of this honor." It must have gone hard with him to say such a thing but it was the best he could think of just now.

"Paradise thinks you more than worthy," I dictated firmly and Lorna rolled it out over the crowd.

He ground his teeth. I really heard them grind. He let his little eyes shoot angry but hopeful glances around the dais. Nobody moved. Evidently nobody could think any faster than he could. Then I saw a sudden faint hope dawn on his face.

"Come, then," he said clearly. "We will go together." And he bowed us forward toward the Gates. I didn't get it for an instant. Then I saw he meant us

to go first. He was being very, very polite and urging us ahead of him through the screen. Then, no doubt, he wouldn't follow.

"Oh no!" I said. "Lorna, tell them this. *Paradise decrees your Hierarch the honor of stepping first through the Earth-Gates.*"

She giggled a little and told them.

And at that a sudden, unexpected tension settled down over the dais. A murmur ran through the priesthood. They stared in new consternation at the Hierarch.

He himself froze to new rigidity. Something had happened and I didn't know what it was. But he did. All the priests did. I sought Dio's eye but he only nodded. It was okay. I waited.

It was shocking to see how the color drained slowly out of the Hierarch's ruddy face as he looked at the Earth-Gates. I couldn't understand it. Naturally he didn't want to leave Malesco but this reaction was all out of proportion to what he was called upon to do.

I thought, "He can just face around toward the crowd and refuse to go, can't he?" and I tried to brace myself to combat that, racking my brain for something to say when he did. I was sure it was what he'd do. I think he was sure too—for a moment or two. I saw him waver just a little as if he were nerving himself to turn.

Then the crowd seemed to sense the same thing. It was still a single organism and the tremor of refusal that had started close up under the platform when the nearest people saw the Hierarch waver spread rapidly backward through the hall.

They didn't want him to stay. They weren't going to let him stay.

"Farewell!" some raucous voice bellowed just below the dais. *"Farewell!"* Other voices took it up. In a backward wave it rolled through the hall until the ceiling rocked with the fforts of the people to speed their parting leader.

He shook his thick shoulders under the golden robe. There was something bull-like about the way he swung his head around and ran a desperate glance along the ranks of the watching priests.

"Fix it!" he said inexplicably through his teeth, hardly moving his lips. "One of you fix it! Flammand, help me! Hyperion, do something! Hyperion, I'll have you burned!"

Nobody moved.

There was dense silence on the dais while the roars of determined farewell gained volume in the hall below. No one on the platform would meet the Hierarch's eye. "Flammand!" he commanded in a frighteningly fierce whisper. *"Flammand!"*

There was an almost imperceptible motion in the priestly throng near Dio. Someone took an indecisive step forward —probably Flammand. Dio, his teeth showing in a grin, stepped forward at the same instant and shouldered the volunteer. The fellow could have got past him, but he didn't try. After a second of agonizing hesitation he fell back and was lost in the ranks.

"Hyperion!" The Hierarch's whisper was almost a scream now. And the silence on the platform had taken on a quality of relentlessness that seemed inflexibly cruel even though I had as yet no idea what it was about.

There was a small seething among the priests to the left. If Hyperion were trying to respond, there seemed plenty to prevent him. Hyperion, like Flammand, subsided. And the priesthood, like the people, in that moment firmly and finally rejected their Hierarch.

He stood there, swaying, his head down, shooting glances of rage and helpless hatred at the ranks of the priesthood which had been his to command until a moment ago, which by some mysterious alchemy of their own had simultaneously decided to defy him.

It was very curious, that moment. Before it the Hierarch had ruled a world. After it, all in one instant, something inexplicable had happened and he was helpless.

HE rolled his small, agonized eyes from face to face. He lowered his head between the heavy golden shoulders and it seemed to me he was about to lumber forward with his bulldozer gait to crush down opposition and force obedience again. But the opposition was too intangible for crushing. He couldn't crush a world. There was only one thing left which he could trample under, if he hoped to save his face—himself.

Looking back now, I can see that he had no real choice. It wasn't only that the world he had ruled without question all his life suddenly presented an unbroken front of flat rebellion to him.

There's just the barest possibility that if he'd attacked the rebellion openly he might have breached it and lived. I don't think he could have succeeded but he might have.

There was much more to his surrender than that. Because to overcome the opposition he'd have had to expose his own trickery. He'd have had to stand self-confessed before the people and the priests as a murderer, a liar and a blasphemer against Alchemy. And that he couldn't do. *Hubris* can be a force for good as well as for evil in such a case as his. Unwittingly I'd given him a choice between death and glory or life and disgrace, and once he realized what the choice was he never faltered.

For what he did then I had to concede him respect. He straightened, throwing his fat shoulders back so that the golden robes swung magnificently. There was a definite note of baiting in the farewells that roared from the crowd below now. But as he lifted his head they slackened a little to see what he would do.

He made them all a stiff, proud bow.

The little byplay on the platform had been lost upon the throng, who could neither hear nor see it. But something in the attitude of the Hierarch and the priests seemed to convey to them at least that something was about to happen which they didn't expect.

The baiting note faded from their yells but the volume of the noise did not slacken. They meant him to go. There was a dogged quality in their voices that would not cease while he stood here in their world. He would not again hear any sound in Malesco except the roaring of the people urging him toward Paradise.

There was nothing left for him to do but accept the honor and the glory that was being thrust upon him. He turned with a regal sweep of his robes and with sudden firmness strode unhesitatingly toward the Earth-Gates. He knew what he was doing. He knew better than any of us just then. But he never faltered.

He moved like a juggernaut to the last. He'd always crushed opposition. Now, when it was his own life that stood in the way of the prestige he'd built up and lived by for so long, his *hubris* sustained him and he crushed that too. He rolled forward with grim pride, refusing to depart from Malesco in anything less than the full dignity of his office. In his own way he was magnificent.

With majestic stride he stepped up on the brink of the Earth-Gates. The blurred sounds of New York traffic and the blurred motions of the lights flickered in his very face as he stood there. He did not hesitate or look back. He raised one arm in a gesture of farewell to the watchers and stepped forward over the threshold.

The last sound he heard must have been the roar of his people driving him out of Malesco and into Paradise.

The people couldn't see what we saw, on the dais. He'd planned it that way naturally. He hadn't wanted anybody but the priests to see the trap he'd set for Lorna and me.

He'd had no intention of letting living people return to New York and open the way for more angels from Paradise. He'd had trouble enough as it was. So the Earth-Gates were set to insure that no living person could pass between the worlds.

There was a flare of bright gold when he touched the surface of the screen. The flare was blinding. From below, in the hall, all anybody could see was the upper area of that flash. But from where I stood I saw the figure in the gleaming robes pause for an instant between two worlds, in that singing void I remembered so well myself. He was balanced on the crossbar of the Alchemic A, in effect, the bridge narrow under his feet.

Then fire sprang out all around him.

I saw the golden robes catch and go up in colored flames. I saw his hair catch and burn like a crown. But when the fire took hold on the man himself its brilliance increased suddenly a hundredfold and the Hierarch vanished in a furnace glare which no one who watched could endure to gaze at.

I shut my eyes. Inside the lids for a moment or two the outlines of the burning man were etched clearly, an afterimage incised by the brilliance of the flame that destroyed him. He stood in full outline upon my inner lids for longer than the man himself stood in his own body. I think he was consumed and destroyed before his image faded against my closed eyes.

AND that's how it happened that Lorna Maxwell and I stepped through onto the corner of Fifth Avenue and Forty-Second Street at three in the

morning, dressed in fantastic garments. The lumbering buses and the stone lions were a lot less real to us than the world we'd just left.

When you think about it you have to realize that a lot of clichés are self-fulfilling by definition. Given a particular set-up plus a particular stimulus, the chances are strong that a particular result will follow, trite because it's more or less inevitable. It wasn't yet dawn in Malesco when we fulfilled our own cliché and rounded out the ceremony by departing with full grandeur through the Earth-Gates, back to Paradise.

Of course I could have made a speech before I left. I could have said, "There's no point in making a ceremony of this because your whole religion is based on a fraud. New York's no more a Paradise than Malesco. The theory of reincarnation is stultifying and alchemy as a religion isn't going to get you anywhere no matter how hard you try."

They would probably have mobbed me if I'd said it. You can't change the thinking patterns of a world overnight by administering a few home truths. It will be a long slow subtle process if it takes place at all. That's Coriole's problem, to be tackled sometime in the future. His immediate problem that night was to get rid of Lorna and me quickly.

I had played Prometheus and my part was over. Lorna had been too much the tool of the Hierarch to be welcome in Malesco. The sooner we were shunted back to Paradise and the Earth-Gates firmly closed behind us, the better.

So we left Malesco. And the gates were closed. I doubt if they will open again in our lifetime. The things that are going on behind it now are probably very interesting and exciting — for Malescans—but they're no business of ours. Coriole knows what he wants and traffic with earth isn't on the list.

We left the rose-red city in the throes of its own revolution and came home to Paradise.

EPILOGUE

SHE calls herself Malesca now. You can see why.

And she's beautiful, all right. Probably her press agent's telling the truth when he says she's the most beautiful girl in the world—if you like that kind of beauty. It's saccharine. I know I couldn't live with it myself.

Still, the Malescan priesthood knew what it was doing. They were clever psychologists. They worked out all the features that would appeal most strongly to Malescans—who are extremely human.

Pygmalion fell in love with Galatea, didn't he? Even though he knew she was nothing but a chunk of stone. But the beauty that shaped the stone was irresistible.

Lorna says she loves me. That began a long time ago, before the episode in Malesco. She says she hasn't changed. But she has, of course. Malesco changed her quite a lot.

She had nothing I wanted before the change and the essential Lorna, the woman behind all that beauty, is exactly the same. I know it. I wish I could forget it. The forces that drive a man or a nation or a world are inarguable. I can't fight them, myself. I wish I could.

Because—blast all clichés—I love her. In my own way. After a fashion. I couldn't live with her. You know what she's like. And that's why I'd never have gone to the place that night if I'd known she was singing there.

But I sat clinking ice in my glass, listening to Malesca sing. They gave her a beautiful voice. I kept repeating axioms to myself to drown out the sweetness of the song that was hypnotizing everyone else in the room. "Beauty is only skin deep," I thought. "Handsome is as handsome does. A bird in the hand—"

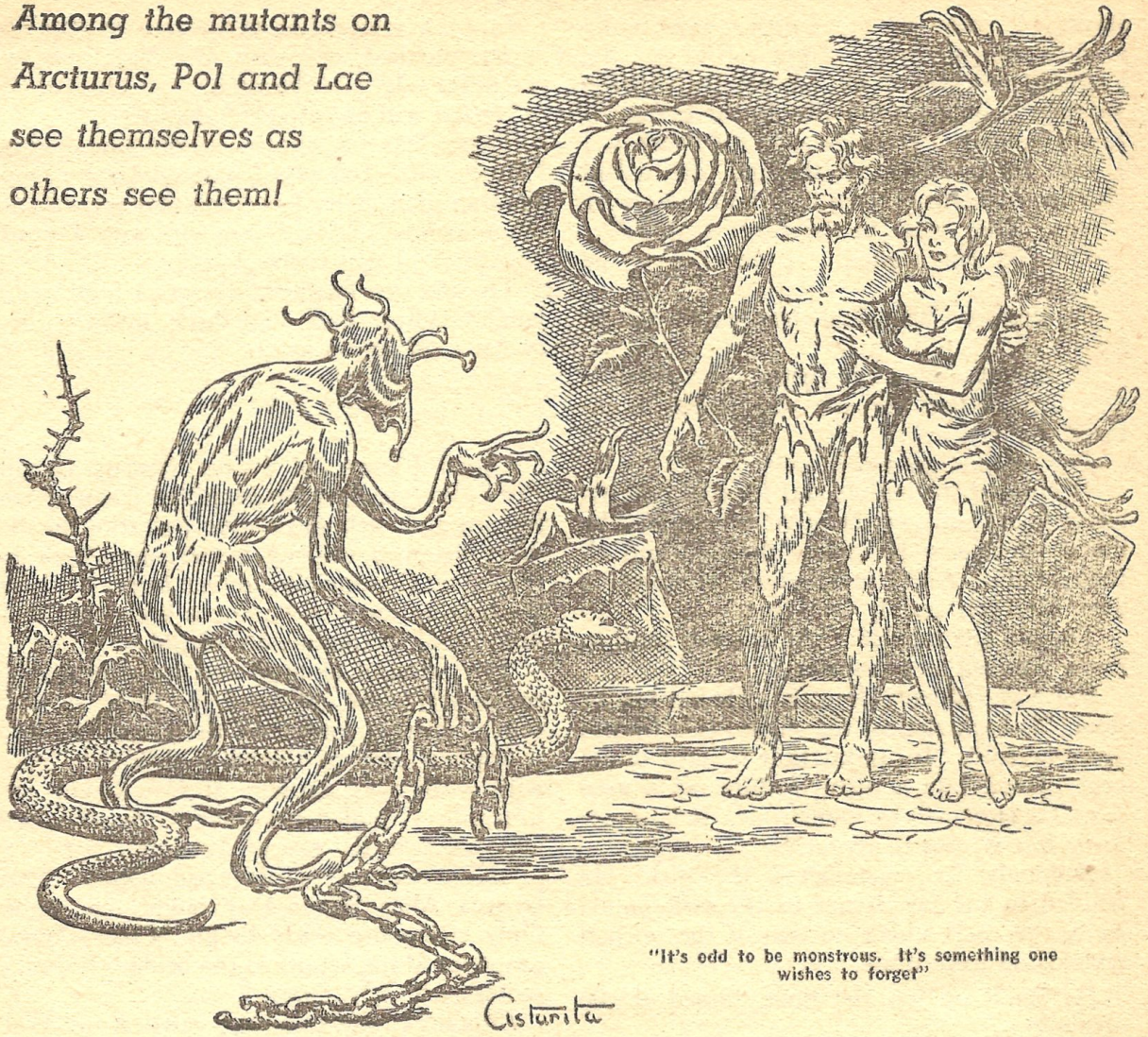
Applause in a sudden storm interrupted me. I looked up to see Malesca bowing, making every motion a symphony of grace. Her luminous blue eyes were searching the dimness for me, bewildered and determined as they always were whenever she looked at me.

She wasn't going to accept refusal. She was going to come to me again as soon as the applause stopped. She was going to sit down beside me and plead against in that lovely throaty voice, soft as velvet and sweet as honey.

I finished my drink in one quick gulp, jumped up and started toward the exit. Behind me the applause died and I heard Malesca's voice calling, "Eddie, *Eddie!*"

When I reached the door I was almost running.

Among the mutants on Arcturus, Pol and Lae see themselves as others see them!



"It's odd to be monstrous. It's something one wishes to forget"

A Condition of Beauty

THEY threw the meat to him and he fed in darkness, his eyes smarted from the after effect of the blinding light which had, for a few moments, shone through the small door.

Food was good and hunger was good. So few things were good. His ears heard the tearing of the flesh from the dry bone and there was a good stinging at the corners of his jaws.

The old one crouched in the corner of the cell and ate with less noise.

He who was known as Pol threw the cleaned bone aside toward the heap of other bones. He padded with bare feet across the dirt floor and drank deeply of the single stream of water that came from the wall and fell into a deep pit at his feet.

The old one, his voice muffled with food, said, "I heard them speak, Pol. This is the year of great light, when the two suns are close. Tomorrow is the ceremony."

"I saw one such," Pol said. "My mother hid me and at last she sent me alone into the

By JOHN D. MacDONALD

forest. I lived in the forest. For many months the sky was bright. And on the brightest morning of all, I heard the singing. By then I could move in the forest as quietly as any animal. I crept through the brush and I saw them. The priests and the naked giggling maidens of the village and those with drums. They went to the silver temple."

The old one sighed. "I never saw the temple."

Pol thumped his naked chest with a strong fist.

"I saw it and, after many days when I was certain that no one was about, I entered the temple."

The old one gasped in awe.

"I entered the temple and I walked on the silver floors and saw the great wheels and the metal which can be looked through and all the rest of it. And I saw pictures of monsters even like you and I, Old One."

The old one cackled. "At last you come to know yourself as a monster."

Pol was suddenly dejected. He sat on the floor, his back against the stone. In a lifeless voice he said, "In darkness it is hard to accept. I feel like a man. I think as a man does. It is odd to be monstrous. It is something one wishes to forget."

Suddenly he remembered the girl. He padded to the far corner of the cell, pulled away the rock which no two of the normal ones could have lifted.

He set it on the dirt floor, hissed at the opening.

Her voice startled him, it was so close. "It is you, Pol," she said softly.

"Who else can lift that stone, Lae? I hear your voice and in my mind I see you as a woman, a normal woman. A woman such as my mother. The old man and I have talked of how horrible it is to be a monster which must be hidden in darkness. It is easy to forget that you are one such, in this eternal darkness."

Her fingers brushed his arm. "Touch my arm," she said.

He did so, felt the horror within him as his fingers told him that her arm was strong, solid, thick.

"There," Lae said. "It is best that you never forget that I am as you."

HE DID not answer for many moments. He said, "Today you refused food again?"

"I did," she said. "I grow weak."

"Try to come through the space in the stones. I will help you."

In a few minutes he was forced to give up as she moaned with pain, her flesh torn by the bitter edges of the rock.

"What will be gained?" she asked.

There was no humor in his low laugh. "Here in the darkness I pretend I am a man as other men. And I pretend that you are as other women. I want you with me. I want you where I can touch you."

The old one laughed. It was a high, wild laugh—fading into something midway between a sob and a moan.

* * * * *

Patrol Eleven, of Planet Census Group Fifty-One, reached the projected frame of reference and each succeeding pulsation of the drive dropped velocity below supra-light to the extent that the pilot screen began to show the blazing form of Arcturus with one hundred times the luminosity of Sol.

The pulsation stopped and the screen came completely alive, adjusted for the fifty percent distortion caused by the speed of .75L.

Captain Harvey Crane, a thin tired man with weak eyes, grinned at Dan Brian, the first officer, pulled the mike to his lips and announced to the rest of the crew:

"Here we are. Homeward bound. This is area Alice Baker Day ought one eight. Only two more areas to go. Chief Photographers Mate, report to the bridge. Arrange sectors with Mr. Brian."

Captain Crane stood up, yawned and said, "Take it, Dan. You'll find me in the sack if there's anything urgent."

When Crane had gone, Dan Brian leaned against the wall and watched Chief Photographers Mate Benton pull the prints out of the slot in the developer.

Benton was an earnest little man with nervous mannerisms.

"Hope to Heaven you don't find anything we have to look at," Dan Brian said sleepily. The photographer gave him an annoyed look.

When the prints were sorted for this first sector, the little man began checking their location against the sector map, using a computor to chart orbits.

He clucked when he found a half degree error in the sector map.

Finally he came to one print. He grew increasingly nervous as he looked at the sector map, clucking and licking his lips.

"What is it?" Dan asked wearily.

"Here's one that isn't recorded. It's up to minimum measurements, but it doesn't appear on the map. The comparison with the

infra-red print shows that it has an atmosphere."

"Check it again," Dan said.

"I've checked it three times," the little man snapped. . . .

Captain Crane moaned as Dan shook him awake. Then he listened quietly. When Dan was through he said, "If Benton says it's up to minimum size, then it is. The last census probably got lazy this close to home."

"Can't we be lazy too?"

Crane stared at Dan until the younger man flushed. "Yes sir. I'll take us over there and call you when it's time to sit down."

Later Captain Crane at the controls, cautiously braked Patrol Eleven below one mile per second before entering the atmosphere of the previously unrecorded planet. Benton had measured it at 4,800 miles circumference at the equator.

It was in orbit around Beta Scorpii at an average radius of 88 million miles, and apparently in that portion of its orbit which, once every few years, took it almost alarmingly close to Arcturus.

He braked further as they descended through the atmosphere, as the sky lightened from black, to purple, to deep blue and the stars disappeared, as the white hard light of Beta Scorpii faded to warm orange-yellow.

The supplementary screen was aimed at the planet below. All four men in the pilot room gasped as they saw the vast ship sprawled against a gentle wooded slope. Trees blurred the edges of it, but the silver metal was still bright and untarnished.

"Measurements!" Captain Crane snapped.

Dan Brian reported five minutes later. "Overall length, sir, twenty-eight hundred feet. Three hundred and ninety feet in thickest cross-section. That makes an index of point-thirteen-ninety-two."

Crane had lost his relaxed air. "Don't just stand there, Mr. Brian. Check the index on the recognition log."

Dan Brian, sweating, did as he was told. In a few moments he said, slowly, "No known military or civil type, sir. Maybe—well, it has obsolete drive. Those tubes look atomic. Some alien intelligence that—"

"Don't talk rot, Mr. Brian! If there were any intelligence in the known universe capable of building that ship, we would have heard of it before now. Use your head and check the historical reference book. Early expeditions."

A FEW moments later Dan Brian gave a muffled gasp.

"Well?" Crane said coldly.

"It checks! Sir, that's the *Victrix*! I read about that when I was a little kid. The tenth ship to leave Earth."

Captain Crane stared at the screen. Patrol Eleven hovered, the crashed *Victrix* squarely in the middle of the supplementary screen. Captain Crane seemed to have forgotten the other men in the pilot room. His lips moved. Brian heard him say softly, "A hundred and ten generations ago."

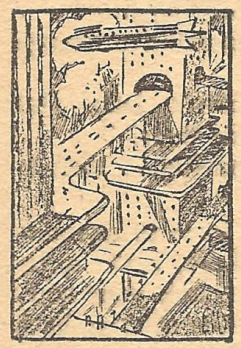
The lean head snapped up. "Take her down, mister."

Dan Brian set Patrol Eleven as close to the hulk as he dared. It was morning on the tiny planet. The sun glittered on the silver hulk. The odd growth, trees with grotesquely thin trunks, had been cleared away from one side of the hulk by unknown hands.

The inside radiation screens were rolled up away from the direct vision ports and all

Enter—

THE OTHER WORLD



—whose emissaries have for thousands of years lurked unseen around us—in the novel of that name by

MURRAY LEINSTER

Next Issue!

hands stared at the silent forest, at the huge silver shape sprawled across the gentle slope.

Crane got the lab report. "Oxygen atmosphere, but too thin. Grabbed some soil. Nothing dangerous detected. Okay to venture out in suits."

As Captain Crane did not have medical approval for Exploration, Dan Brian headed the group of five.

It happened five minutes after they stepped down onto the soil of the new planet, five minutes after their shoes, heavily weighted with lead, touched the thin, crisp grass.

Dan heard it first. He made a terse report back to the ship, loosened the weapon at his belt and waited.

It was a form of music. A distant thump of drums.

They moved closer to the port out of which they had clambered.

A procession came up over the brow of the hill.

Two of the men promptly became ill, which, clad as they were, was a very messy affair. Dan Brian swallowed hard.

His skin crawled as he watched them. They came close to him, but not too close. They spread out in a half circle and fell to their knees. Their chant resounded in the quiet forest glade. Red blood gushed after the expert thrust of the sacrifical knife.

They bowed low and sang and at last turned and went back the way they had come. . . .

* * * * *

Dan Brian sat in Captain Crane's cabin.

Dan shook his head slowly. "I don't get it, sir. I've seen how they are on Venus. I've seen intelligent things that looked remotely like beetles, and sea slugs, and birds with scales instead of feathers. But nothing hit me like that did."

It was night, a time for conjecture.

Captain Crane said slowly, "I don't think you are thinking clearly, Dan. Revulsion needs a stepping-off place. Something completely alien is never horrible. It is merely incomprehensible. This is the first time that you or I have ever seen creatures which are sufficiently like men so that the unconscious comparison makes them horrible."

Dan thought it over and nodded slowly. "That must be it. I can see what you mean. A bad scar on one of those Venusians would mean nothing to me. Across the face of a beautiful woman, it would mean a great deal."

Crane sucked on his pipe. Then he examined the dark wood. He said slowly, "They are horrible to us, Dan, because they are men."

Dan laughed uneasily.

"Don't laugh, my boy. I've seen the effects of environment before. Those are the decendents of the survivors of the Victrix. Their bodies have merely adjusted to the thin air, the gravity, other factors. Diet. Those are humans."

Dan was closer to being ill than he had been when he had first seen them. And he knew that Crane was right. It was nightmare.

"But—such a terrific change!" he protested, hoping against hope that Crane was wrong.

"It is extreme," Crane agreed. "Thus nature had help. Selective breeding. Probably all tied up with their religious fetishes."

"But how would they know the change was necessary?"

"Intellectually, they wouldn't, Dan. But some sixth sense would guide them."

"I hate the thought of having to look at them tomorrow."

"It has to be done. We have to examine the ship, examine their village, make a report on customs. You can thank your stars that we don't have to bring one of them back with us for examination. Fortunately we don't have provision for that on this ship. Somebody not as lucky will have that pleasure. Happy dreams to them."

"I'd better turn in," Dan said.

"Read your manual on alien cultures. You'll have to get transcripts, tri-di films, measurements."

Dan went reluctantly to bed. . . .

CAPTAIN CRANE took a nap after Dan Brian had been gone for five hours. He was awakened by Dan, who, a look of excitement on his face, was shaking him by the shoulder.

"Back so soon?" Crane said sleepily.

"Sir, what did you mean by proper provision to take some of those people back with us?"

"I mean that we can't release a compartment to have the air pressure reduced to what they're used to. We can't store their food."

"But, sir, suppose a couple of them can breathe our air and eat our food?"

"Are you crazy, mister? Don't you want to be able to eat for the rest of the trip? Has the sun gotten to you?"

"But, sir—"

"Where are these horrors that you want to collect like specimens."

"They're on the ship."

"What!" Captain Crane roared. He jumped to his feet. "Where are they? I'll have you broken for this!"

They were in the main lounge. Captain Crane stopped dead as he saw them. He stared with his mouth open and then he smiled.

The man was strong and well-muscled. His eyes were squinted against the light. In spite of his matted hair and beard, Crane guessed his age at about twenty-five or twenty-six. His gray eyes looked intelligent. He wore trousers borrowed from a crew member.

The girl clung to his hand. They stood close together, not frightened but wary. She seemed to be about eighteen. She was very beautiful. They had dressed her in a sheet from one of the cots. It was fastened around her slim waist with a crewman's belt.

"There were three of them, sir," Dan said excitedly. "They were underground. That's why they're so pale. The old one died of the shock of being released and seeing us. Anderson, the language guy, has made progress. These two belong to the same race. So that means you were right. They're throwbacks and the treatment is to imprison them, prevent their breeding. Please, sir, can we take them along. They catch on quickly. Imagine finding these two among that race of—of monsters."

* * * * *

The words of the other monsters were strange. Pol could not understand them. He could understand the gestures. Anything was better than remaining in that prison under the ground. He was grateful to them. They had released him, had brought him and Lae to the new silver temple, the one that stood upright. Their air inside their temple was heavy and thick, but not unpleasant.

One of the monsters came and beckoned to him. Holding Lae's hand he went through the narrow corridor and came into a small room where chairs were fixed to the floor.

The monster pointed to the screen. He and Lae watched. The screen was dark and suddenly there was a lurching so that they stumbled and nearly fell. In the screen they saw the old temple, dropping away beneath them.

"Lae, we are being taken into the sky in this temple. Are you afraid."

"Not with you near."

HER hand was warm in his. They watched the earth of their land until it startlingly resembled a small ball, and the height made him weak and dizzy.

Then they were led back to the small room once more.

They were left alone.

Pol looked down into the face of Lae, the Ugly, and he said, "It is better that we go with these, our brothers, who somehow have found freedom."

"Yes, it is better."

"You are not afraid?"

"I am not afraid."

"I have a thought, Lae. Maybe in the place to which they take us, there will be no men or women properly formed. Maybe in time we shall forget what proper men and women look like and we can thus forget that we are incredibly ugly."

"That may be so," she said softly.

He glanced down and found that he was holding her hand. That puzzled him because none of the other monsters were nearby and thus there was no need of it.

Yet he did not wish to release her.

The silver temple moved in silence.

a novelet by **ARTHUR K. BARNES**

A Hall of Fame Classic

The HOTHOUSE

CHAPTER I

The Ark

DAY again—one hundred and seventy dragging hours of throttling, humid heat. An interminable period of monotony lived in the eternal mists, swirling with sluggish dankness, enervating, miasmatic, pulsant with the secret whisperings of mephitic life-forms. That accounted for the dull existence of the Venusian trader, safe in the protection of his stilt-legged trading post twenty feet above the spongy earth—but bored to the point of madness.

Tommy Strike stepped out from under the needle-spray antiseptic shower that was the Earthman's chief defense against the myriad malignant bacterial infections swarming the hothouse

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Fully fifty feet the monster towered into the mist

Not only was Gerry Carlyle a beautiful woman, but she was also sure of her own ability to bring back alive any creature of any sphere!

PLANET

that is Venus. He grabbed a towel, made a pass at the lever to turn on the refrigeration unit that preserved them during the hot days, shut off the night heating system and yelled:

"Roy! Awake! Arise! Today's the great day! The British are coming! Wake up for the event!"

Roy Ransom, Strike's assistant, staggered into view, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"British?" he mumbled. "What British?"

"Why, Gerry Carlyle! The great Carlyle is coming today. In his special ship, with his trained crew, straight from the Interplanetary Zoo in London. The famous 'Catch-'em-alive' Carlyle is on his way and we're the lucky guys chosen to guide him on his expedition on Venus!"

Ransom scratched one thick hairy leg and stepped under the shower with a

sour expression. "Ain't that somethin'?" he inquired.

"You don't look with favor on Mister Carlyle?" Strike chuckled.

"No, I don't. I've heard all I want to hear about him. Capturing animals from different planets and bringing them back alive to the Zoo in London is all right. I'd like the job myself. But any guy that rates the sickening amount of publicity he does must have something phony about 'im." He kicked toward the short-wave radio in one corner of the living room.

"Bein' so close to the sun, we're lucky if we bring in a couple of Earth programs a day through the interference. An' it seems to me every damn' one of 'em has somethin' about the famous Carlyle. Gerry Carlyle eats Lowden's Vita-cubes on expedition. Gerry Carlyle smokes germ-free Suaves. Gerry Carlyle drinks refreshin' Alka-lager. *Pfui!*

"An' now we're ordered to slog around this drippin' planet for 'im, doin' all the work of baggin' a bunch of weird specimens for the yokels t' gape at, while he gets all the glory back home!"

TOMMY STRIKE laughed good naturedly.

"You're all bark and not much bite, Roy. You're just as glad as I am something's turned up to relieve the monotony." He brought out his daytime clothes, singlet and trousers of thin rubberized material and the inevitable broad-soled boots for traversing the treacherous soft spots on Venus' surface.

"Yeah?" retorted Ransom. "I can tell you one thing this visit'll turn up, an' that's trouble. Sure as you're born, Tommy, that guy's comin' here to get two or three *Murris*—he hopes! An' you know what that'll mean!"

Strike's eyes clouded. There was truth in Ransom's remarks. Hunting for the strange little creatures called *Murris* never had resulted in anything but trouble since the day Sidney Murray, co-leader of the first great Venusian exploration party, the Cecil Stanhope-Sidney Murray Expedition, first set eyes upon them.

"Well," he shrugged, "we can stall until just before he's ready to leave and have *some* fun at least. Maybe he'll listen to reason."

Ransom snorted in wordless disgust at this fantastic hope.

"Anyhow," insisted Strike, determined to see the cheerful side, "even if there is any disturbance, it always blows over in a few days. I'm heading for the landing field. They're just about due."

Tommy Strike stepped outside into the breathlessly hot blinding mist, thick with the stench of rot and decay. Earthly eyes could not penetrate this eternal shroud for more than a hundred feet at a time, even when a wind stirred the stuff up to resemble the churning of a weak solution of dirty milk. Strike grimaced and thoughtlessly filled and lit his pipe.

Thirty seconds later the air was filled with the thin screams and bangings of dozens of the fabulous whiz-bang beetles as they hurtled their armored bodies blindly against the metal walls of the station, attracted by the odor of tobacco. Strike flinched and hurriedly doused the pipe. A man couldn't even have the solace of a smoke on this damned planet. His life would be endangered by the terrific speed of those whiz-bangs.

A few steps took Strike to the safety of the rear of the station, where abandoned calciumcarbonate tanks loomed like metal giants in the fog. There was a time when it had been necessary to pump the stuff to the miniature spaceport a safe distance away whenever a ship was about to land.

There, sprayed forth from thousands of tiny nozzles high into the air, its tremendous affinity for water carved a clear vertical tunnel in the fog for the approaching spaceship pilot. New telescopic developments, however, rendered the device obsolete.

Strike paced deliberately along the trail that paralleled the ancient pipeline —Earthlings soon learn not to overexert in that atmosphere—and before he had covered half of it his quick ears caught the shrill whine of a spacecraft plunging recklessly into the Venusian air-envelope.

It rose to a nerve-rasping pitch, then dropped sharply away to silence. Presently, sounding curiously muffled and distorted through the clouds, came the noise of opening ports, the clang of metal upon metal, voices. Gerry Carlyle and company had arrived.

Strike increased his pace somewhat and shortly entered the clearing that

served as space-port. He paused to let his amazed eyes roam over the unaccustomed sight. Gerry Carlyle's famous expeditionary ship was an incredible monster of gleaming metal, occupying almost the entire field, towering into the air further than the eye could reach in that atmosphere. Its green glass portholes were glowing weirdly from the ship's lights as they looked down upon the stranger.

The craft was immense, approaching in size the giant clipper ships that traveled to the furthermost reaches of the System. Strike had never before been so close to a ship of such proportions. He smiled at sight of the name on her bow —*The Ark.*

The Ark, of course, was one of the new centrifugal flyers, containing in her stern a centrifuge of unbelievable power with millions of tiny rotors running in blasts of compressed air, generating sufficient energy to hurl the ship through space at tremendous speeds. The equipment of *The Ark,* too, was the talk of the System.

CARLYLE, backed by the resources of the Interplanetary Zoo, had turned the ship into a floating laboratory, with a compartment for the captured specimens arranged to duplicate exactly the life conditions of their native planets. All the newer scientific inventions were included in her operating apparatus — the paralysis ray, anti-gravity, electronic telescope, a dozen other things that Strike knew by name only.

Strike's musings were interrupted by the approach of a snappily-uniformed man. The fellow saluted, smiling.

"Are you Mr. Strike?" he asked. "I'm sub-pilot Barrows of *The Ark* and very glad to meet you. Gerry Carlyle will see you at once. We're anxious to get to work immediately."

This day was to be one of many surprises for Tommy Strike and perhaps the greatest shock of all was received when he stood beside the sloping runway leading into the brightly lighted belly of the ship. For, awaiting him there, one hand outstretched and a cool little smile on her lips, stood the most beautiful girl he had ever seen.

"Mr. Strike," said Barrows, "this is Miss Gerry Carlyle."

Strike stared, thunderstruck. In those days of advanced plastic surgery, feminine beauty wasn't rare but even Strike's unpractised eye knew that here was the real thing. No synthetic blonde baby-doll here but a natural beauty untouched by the surgeon's knife—spun-gold hair, intelligence lighting dark eyes, a hint of passion and temper in the curve of mouth and arch of nostrils. In short, a woman.

Miss Carlyle's voice was an ice-water jet that reminded Strike of his manners.

"You don't seem enthusiastic over your temporary employer, Mr. Strike. Something wrong about me?" She withdrew her fingers from Strike's grasp and watched the crimson tide crawl up his neck.

"Oh—oh, no." Strike fumbled for words. "That is, I'm surprised that you're a woman. I—we expected to find a man in—well, in your position. It's more like a man's job."

Sub-pilot Barrows could have warned Strike that this was a touchy point with Gerry Carlyle but he had no chance. The girl drew herself up and spoke coldly.

"There isn't a man in the business who has done nearly as well as I. Name a half-dozen hunters. Rogers, Camden, Potter—they aren't in the same class with me. Man's job? I think you needn't worry about me, Mr. Strike. You'll find I'm man enough for anything *this* planet has to offer."

Strike's eyebrow twitched. An arrogant hussy, withal. Terrific sense of her own importance, wilful, selfish. He decided he didn't like her and rather hoped

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she *had* come looking for *Murris*. If so, she would learn one or two bitter lessons.

There followed a five-minute interlude of scurrying about and shouting and unloading, all done to the tune of Gerry Carlyle's voice, which could crack like a whiplash when issuing commands.

Then Strike found himself leading a small party back to the trading post with Miss Carlyle's arm surprisingly through his, her red lips asking a hundred questions, her golden head bent as she listened with flattering attention.

FIRST she wished to know about the business of the trading post.

"It isn't very exciting," Strike told her. "Mostly sitting around being bored stiff, playing cards or fiddling with a bum radio. Several times during a Venusian day our natives bring in a load of some of the medicinal plants for which we're up here to trade. Occasionally a rough gem of one kind or another, though Venus is very poor in minerals. The only stone really worth much to be found up here is the emerald."

Gerry Carlyle could scarcely believe that there was any profit in medicinal plants, considering transportation costs.

"Surely there isn't enough in it to persuade a young man like you to bury himself in—in this." She waved her hand around disaparagingly.

"There's profit in it, all right." Strike shrugged. "The drugs distilled from some of the Venusian growths are plenty valuable. And then there's the adventure angle." He smiled wryly.

"Plenty of young bucks are willing to sign a three-year contract for the thrills of living on Venus if they don't know anything about it beforehand. But it does take an awful lot of that stuff to bring a transport ship our way. We seldom see a ship more often than three or four Earth-months apart."

The girl next directed his attention to the thousands of fungi now springing up through the moist earth with almost visible movement. They were shaped somewhat like the human body and so pale they seemed like a host of tiny corpses rising from their graves.

Strike grimaced. He had never liked those things. They reminded him constantly that battle and destruction were the watchwords in this hellhole, where the fang of every creature was turned upon his neighbor and the plants had poisoned thorns and even the flowers gave off noxious gases to snare the unwary.

"Yes," he said. "They grow and propagate amazingly fast. Many of the smaller life-forms here exist only a single day—they are born, live and die in one hundred and seventy hours. Naturally their life cycle is speeded up. In a few hours all these puffball fungi will begin popping at once to spread their spores around. It's a funny sight.

"During the long night, of course, the spores lie dormant. And most of the larger creatures hibernate from the intense cold. Our night life up here is nil. This is a nine-o'clock planet for sure."

Gerry Carlyle observed what all newcomers observe the minute they set foot on Venus. Although the view is a drab, almost colorless one, an incredible multiplicity of odors assails the nostrils—sweet, sharp, musklike, pungent, spicy, with many unfamiliar olfactory sensations to boot.

Strike explained this too. On Earth flowering plants are fertilized by the passage of insects from one bloom to another. For this reason they develop petals of vivid colors to attract bees and butterflies and other insects. But on Venus, where perpetual mist renders impotent any appeal to the sense of sight, plants have adapted themselves to appeal to the sense of smell and therefore give off all sorts of enticing odors.

So it went, the intimate give and take of question and answer, the pleasant business of getting acquainted, until the all-too-short walk to the station was over. But Strike was not deceived by the girl's sudden change of attitude.

He knew that an interplanetary hunter of Gerry Carlyle's experience would certainly have read up on Venus before ever coming there. He realized she knew the answers already to every question she asked.

She had simply noticed Strike's disapproving eyebrow during the first moments of their meeting and had deliberately set out to ingratiate herself with him to promote harmony during her brief stay on the cloudy planet. Strike was willing to harmonize but he looked upon the girl with caution and distaste. No man likes any woman to think she's bamboozling him.

CHAPTER II

The Hunters

GERRY CARLYLE was decidedly a woman of action.

"No time to waste," she declared incisively as they reached the post. "Earth and Venus are nearing conjunction and I want to be ready to take off as soon after that date as possible.

"I've no wish to hang around in space waiting for Earth to catch up to us with a cargo of weird specimens raising hades in the hold. If you've no objections, Mr. Strike, we'll make our first foray at once."

Strike nodded, staring at this strange girl, who could be one instant so warm and friendly, the next imperious and dominating as a queen.

"Sure," he agreed. "Be with you in a moment."

He ran up the metal stairway to where Roy Ransom's face hung over the porch rail like an amazed bearded balloon and the two vanished into the house. Strike returned shortly with a tiny two-way radio.

"Ransom sends out a radio beam for us to travel on. I tell him which way to turn it in case we deviate from a straight line. It's the only possible way to cover any distance in this murk." He adjusted a single earphone, slipped receiver and broadcaster unit into a capacious pocket.

Next he insisted on painting the insides of everyone's nostrils with a tarry aromatic substance.

"Germ-killer," he smiled. "For each dangerous animal on this planet there are a hundred vicious bacteria that will knock off an Earthman in twenty hours. I guess that finishes up the preliminaries. Shall we go? I ought to warn you that the sense of hearing is well developed up here, so it'll help if you move as quietly as possible."

"One moment." Gerry Carlyle's cool voice nailed Strike to the ground. "I want two things thoroughly understood. First, I'm the sole leader of this party and what I say goes." She smiled with icy sweetness. "No complaints, of course, Mr. Strike, but it's just as well to forestall future misunderstandings.

"Secondly, you must know that the main object of this expedition is to catch one or more *Murris* and return with them alive. We'll take a number of other interesting specimens, of course, but the *Murri* is our real goal."

She looked around challengingly, as if expecting a reaction. She was not disappointed. Strike glanced up at the porch, exchanged a significant look with Ransom.

He smiled wryly.

Gerry Carlyle's temper flared out momentarily.

"What's the mystery about this *Murri*, anyhow? Everywhere I go, on Venus, back on Earth among members of my own profession, if the word *Murri* is mentioned everyone immediately looks at the floor and scowls and tries to change the subject. Why?"

No one spoke. The Carlyle party shifted uneasily, their boots making shucking sounds. Presently Strike offered, "The fact is, you'll never take back a *Murri* alive. But you wouldn't believe me if I told you the reason, Miss Carlyle. I—"

"Why not? What's the matter with them? Is their presence fatal to a human in some way?"

"Oh, no."

"Are they so rare or so shy they can't be found?"

"No, I think I can find you some before you take off."

"Then are they so delicate they can't stand the trip? If so, I can tell you we've done everything to make hold number three an exact duplicate of living conditions here."

"No, it isn't that either," Strike sighed.

"Then what is it?" she cried. "Why these evasions and secretive glances? You're acting just like Hank Rogers when I caught him one day in the Explorers' Club.

"He came up here awhile back to get a good *Murri* specimen. But he returned empty-handed. I asked him why, and he refused to tell me. Acted actually embarrassed about something. What's it all about?"

Tommy Strike had no more stomach for feminine ridicule than the average man, so he shook his head firmly.

"It can't be explained, Miss Carlyle. It's just something you'll find out for yourself."

AND on that note of dissatisfaction the party struck off through the mist in search of the weird animal life of Venus. The half-dozen men from *The Ark* were surprised to find the going comparatively easy.

Although the great amount of water on Venus would presuppose profuse jungle growth, there is insufficient sunlight to support much more than the tallest varieties of trees, which shoot hundreds of feet up into the curtain of the mist, their broad-bladed leaves spread wide to treasure every stray sunbeam that filters through.

Undergrowth, which is confined to a sprawling, cactuslike shrub with poisonous spines and to a great many species of drably flowering plants with innumerable odors and perfumes, is laid out almost geometrically in order to catch the diluted sunshine without interference from the occasional lonely trees.

"The main danger in travel," as Strike explained, "is in losing the beam. Sometimes we have to circle a bog and we've got to be pretty careful not to lose that radio beam."

The party, with Strike and Gerry Carlyle in the lead, hadn't been five minutes away from the station when the restless quiet was shattered by a terrific grunting and coughing like the roar of a thousand hogs at feeding time. The noise was intermittent, rumbling for a few seconds with sub-surface-car speed somewhere ahead, then stopping abruptly to be succeeded by slopping and smacking sounds.

The entire party was stricken in its tracks for an instant by the blast of strange thunder. Not from fear, because these people had met and bested nature's most terrifying forms all over the Solar System—but rather at the unexpectedness of it, coming literally from out of nowhere.

Strike grinned. "Shovel-mouth," he explained. "Not very dangerous."

Gerry Carlyle glanced tolerantly at her guide at the implication. "We prefer 'em dangerous, as a matter of fact. Though I hardly expected to find anything interesting this close to—er—civilization."

Strike grinned at the thrust and a little prickle of excitement crawled up his spine as he watched the Carlyle party slip into their smooth routine. The girl's crisp commands detailed one man to remain with the bulky equipment. Two more loaded a pair of cathode-bolt guns that looked like baby cannon beside the pistol Strike carried for emergencies.

Two of the others, including the girl, selected weapons that looked very much like the old-fashioned rifles—to be seen now only in museums—that fired lead or steel projectiles, except for a rather large bore and cumbersome breech. Barrows was to work the camera.

"Allen," Gerry snapped, "you circle around to the left. Kranz to the right. As usual, hold your fire unless it's absolutely necessary to prevent the specimen's escape. We'll give you three minutes to get into position."

The two flankers were already moving off into the mist when Strike woke up.

"Wait!" he cracked out. "Come back here. No one must get out of visual touch with me! It's too easy to get permanently lost. Sounds carry far, naturally, but it's impossible for an untrained ear to tell which direction they're coming from in this fog."

Gerry Carlyle's eyes flashed in momentary anger as her commands were countermanded but the plan of action stood as amended to permit the two flankers to reman within sight of the main body.

Strike had thought that Miss Carlyle's assistants were rather a colorless lot, stooges automatically going through letter-perfect roles, and wondered if they'd be any good if they found themselves suddenly without a leader. But when the party spread out with military precision for the stalk Tommy Strike had to admit to himself that he had never witnessed a more competent one.

NOT a single unnatural sound broke the quiet. Not a stick snapped, not a fungus squelched beneath an incautious heel. Even the sucking noises from marshy spots were silenced. In sixty seconds they slipped into a little clearing and stood gazing with professional curiosity at the doomed shovel-mouth.

It was worth a second look. Fifty feet long and nearly twenty feet wide, it had three pairs of squat powerful legs ending in enormously spatulate discs. Its hide was a thick, tough gray stuff that gleamed dully with a wet slickness in the half light.

But the most surprising feature was the creature's head which, instead of tapering to a point, broadened into a mammoth snout that extended several feet horizontally from mouth-corner to mouth-corner. When placed to the ground it had a ludicrous similarity to the fan-tail vacuum cleaner attachment used to clean upholstered furniture.

The shovel-mouth stared at the party without interest from out of muddy eyes, then lowered his head and waddled vigorously across the clearing. His mouth plowed up a wide shallow furrow as he ate indiscriminately of the numerous fungi, low-lying bushes, sticks and mud.

"Herbivorous," Strike murmured. "His main article of diet is fungus growths but it takes so much for a meal that he has to spend most of his waking hours eating everything he can get his mouth on."

Evidently the animal had been at it some time, for the clearing looked as if a drunken farmer had been trying to plow it up. Gerry signaled, and her men moved into position like soldiers. She slipped up on the creature's blind side and aimed her curious rifle at the soft, inner portion of the shovel-mouth's leg.

Plop! The beast jerked, nipped at the wound momentarily, then continued to feed. Twenty seconds later it reeled dizzily about and fell to the ground, unconscious.

Just like that—simple, efficient, no fuss at all. Tommy Strike felt a sense of anticlimax.

"What a disappointment," he said ruefully. "I expected a terrific battle and a lot of excitement with maybe one or two of us half killed for the sake of the movies!"

"With Mr. Strike heroically rescuing Gerry Carlyle from the jaws of death?" The girl smiled as Strike winced. "Sorry, but this is a business, Mr. Strike, and I find it pays to play safe and sane and preserve my men intact.

"I value them too much to risk their lives for the sake of a bunch of cheap thrill seekers back home. No. We have excitement and adventure only when someone makes a mistake. Carlyle parties make a minimum of mistakes."

It was the arrogant and cocksure Gerry Carlyle speaking then and Strike let it go. "I suppose you used a sort of hypodermic bullet in that rifle of yours. But I thought you'd be using more scientific weapons than that. It seems sort of—sort of primitive."

The girl smiled.

"I know. You're wondering about the anaesthetic gases. Or the wonderful new paralysis ray. Well, there's a lot of inventions that work fine under controlled lab conditions that are flops in the field.

"The paralysis ray is just a toy, totally impracticable. It's unreliable because each different animal requires a different amount of the ray to subdue him and we seldom have time to fool around experimenting in my work.

"It may also prove fatal if the victim gets too much of a jolt. As for knockout gas, it necessitates the hunters wearing masks and it is difficult to control in the proper dosages—between unconsciousness and death."

Strike nodded understanding and turned to receive still another surprise. While he and the girl talked the party had prepared the motionless shovel-mouth for transportation back to *The Ark*. Broad bands of bluish metal had been fastened around legs and neck and the men had even managed to slide two or three underneath the huge body and encircle it.

WIRES led from each piece of metal to a common source, a compact boxlike affair vaguely resembling a battery case with two dials on its face. A throw of a switch energized the metal and gradually the mighty bulk of the shovel-mouth rose from the ground. It hung in the air, suspended like a grotesque toy balloon. To tow it back to the ship would be a simple matter.

"Anti-gravity," said the girl with a theatrical flourish of the hand. "We give the metal bands a gravity charge of slightly more than one. Like repelling magnetic charges, they rise from the ground and carry the animal with them."

The equipment-bearer simply lashed a rope round his waist to pull the shovel-mouth along behind and the party resumed the hunt.

"I think," said Gerry Carlyle, "that we're too likely to bump into something without warning in this mist. If you'll bring out the electronic telescope, Mr. Barrows—"

Barrows at once produced one of the most interesting gadgets that Strike had

yet seen, a portable model of the apparatus used on all the modern centrifugal flyers. It consisted of a power unit carried by one of the men, and a long glass tube to be carried by the observer.

The front of it presented a convex surface covered with photoelectric material, to the electron streams of all kinds of light, from ultra-violet to infra-red.

As the light particles entered the tube, they passed through a series of three electrostatic fields for focusing, and then through another field for magnification. At the rear of the tube they struck a fluorescent screen and reproduced the image. Looking through the baby telescope gave the impression of gazing down a tunnel in the mist for as far as the eye could reach.

By keeping in constant touch with Ransom at the post, who kept the beam moving slowly around like the spoke of a wheel, Strike enabled the party to move laterally.

Through the telescope they picked up many of the smaller and shyer life-forms not ordinarily seen—lizards, crawling shapes, crablike forms, even two or three of the scaly man-things native to Venus, slithering silently through the fog with sulky expressions on their not-too-intelligent fishlike faces.

Strike and Gerry became so interested in watching through the 'scope that it was neary their undoing.

Without warning a rushing sound filled the air at their left, and a round gray ball rolled swiftly into view. It crossed their path dead ahead, propelling itself with dozens of stout cilia that sprouted indiscriminately from all sides, then paused abruptly.

The miniature forest of arms waved delicately and exploringly in the air as if trying to locate the source of a new disturbance. Then the fantastic thing rushed unerringly at the Carlyle party.

All the hunters leaped agilely aside and let the juggernaut roll past. It stopped a few yards beyond with another waving of cilia, as if listening intently. Gerry pumped a hypodermic bullet at it, but the charge ripped glancingly off the armourlike lorica.

"Rotifer," said Strike shortly. "Something like the tiny animalcules back on Earth, magnified many times and adapted for land travel. Venus is largely aqueous and was even more so at one time. Much of its terrestrial life developed from life-forms originally dwelling in the water—"

He stepped aside again casually as the rotifer rumbled by. "They have their uses, though. That half-hidden mouth of theirs takes in everything it contacts. They're the scavengers of this planet. We call 'em Venusian buzzards."

The party scattered for a third time as the blind devourer sought to catch them once more. Barrows looked appealingly at his leader.

"They may have their uses," admitted the sub-pilot, "but this baby'll be a nuisance if we have to spend the rest of the trip dodging him."

There was truth in that, so the rotifer was despatched with a cathode bolt. But as they crowded around to examine this curious bit of protoplasmic phenomena, a shrill scream racked their nerves from high up in the fog, as frightfully shocking as the shriek of a wounded horse. They swiveled about as a man to gaze upon the most terrifying of all products of Venusian vertebrate evolution.

FULLY fifty feet the monster towered into the mist, standing upright on two massive legs reminiscent of the extinct terrestrial Tyrannosaurus rex. A set of short forelegs were equipped with hideously lethal claws. The head was long and narrow like a wolf's snout, with large ears and slavering fangs.

Everything about the nightmare creature was constructed for efficient annihilation, particularly of those animals who mistakenly sought safety in the tops of the tall trees.

"A whip!" yelled Strike, turning to the cathode-gun carriers, sudden apprehension stabbing him deep. "It's a whip! Let him have it, quick!"

The men looked uncertainly at Gerry Carlyle, who promptly countermanded the order.

"Not so fast. I want this one alive. They've nothing like him in London."

She flipped up her rifle, fired at a likely spot. Strike groaned as the monstrous whip squealed shrilly again and again, staring down at the tiny Earthlings from fiery little eyes.

Then from that wolfish snout uncurled an amazing fifty-foot length of razor-edged tongue, like that of an Earthly anteater. Straight at Gerry Carlyle it lashed out, cracking sharply. Strike's

rush caught the girl from behind and dumped her gently but quickly to the spongy earth.

"Curl up in a ball," he yammered in her ear, "so he can't get any purchase with that tongue!"

Gerry obeyed and Strike turned to warn the others as the whip swished over the girl's ducking head.

"Scatter!" he cried. Don't—"

But too late. That coiling sweep of flesh rope struck Barrows glancingly across the head, shearing off the lobe of one ear. Blood spurted as the sub-pilot staggered away with one hand to his face.

The rest of the bearers darted alertly away in all directions, seeking the shelter of the fog. But the man who was burdened with the heavy equipment paused momentarily to shed himself of it. It cost him his life. Straight and sure that incredible tongue snaked out to wind itself around the man's twisting form. Like a catapult he shot into the air toward the gaping fanged jaws.

The fellow struggled, screaming like a madman. In vain. One arm was pinioned. He hadn't a chance to defend himself. Before his surprised companions could bring their guns to bear on the whip, there was a swift crunch, a hideous splattering of crimson stuff that looked bright and horrible against the drab background, and it was all over. The expeditionary force was reduced by one.

All possibility of rescue being gone, the reserve gunners lowered their deadly guns and allowed the hunters to go about the job of subduing the monster.

Little snapping reports sounded in rapid succession—three, four, five.

And presently the whip reeled like a huge building in an earthquake. Uncertainty racked the big body. It swayed. A few wavering steps described a short half circle. Then quietly it lay awkwardly down and passed into insensibility.

Strike clambered upright and pulled Gerry to her feet. He wiped cold sweat from his brow.

"Whew! That was too close for comfort!"

The girl brushed herself off and stared Strike in the eye. "Hereafter, Mr. Strike, please remember that in a real emergency such as this, one of our cardinal rules is every man for himself. The principle of throwing away two lives in a futile effort to save one is not encouraged among us. No more heroics, if you please!"

Strike's face flamed. No one likes to be bawled out when he's expecting warm gratitude. But even more Strike was angry at the apparent callousness.

"Then you don't think much of your assistants," he snapped, looking significantly at the bloody muzzle of the whip.

NO emotion disturbed the serenity of the girl's face.

"On the contrary. I regret Blair's passing very much. He was a well-trained and valuable man. But he can be replaced."

"Good God, woman!" cried Strike. "Haven't you any feelings. A friend of yours has just been done to death horribly on an alien planet, far from his home and family. And you—" He stopped, suddenly ashamed of his outburst of sentiment.

Gerry said simply, "We never sign on family men."

Then she turned her back on Strike and snapped orders to prepare the whip for transportation back to *The Ark*. But in the last tiny instant as she turned away Strike glimpsed something in her eye that smote him speechless with its sudden and complete revelation.

It explained at once and absolutely the reason for Gerry Carlyle's shell of impersonal reserve and callousness. She was a woman walking in a man's world, speaking man's language, using man's tools.

As a constant companion of men she had to force herself to live their life, meet them on their own terms. To command their respect she felt she had no right to use the natural endowments—her charm and beauty—that nature intended her to use for that purpose.

Indeed, she dared not use them, for fear of the consequences. To give way to feminine emotion would be, she feared, to lose her domination over her male subordinates. She was, in short, that most pathetic of beings—a woman who dared not be a woman.

All this Tommy Strike learned and comprehended in a single glance. His feelings toward Gerry Carlyle began to change from dislike to pity and perhaps to something warmer. The thing he had seen was a woman's tear.

CHAPTER III

The Murris

THE succeeding days passed swiftly and adventurously. Specimen after weird specimen was subdued and carried to the rapidly filling hold of *The Ark*.

The only fly in Strike's ointment was the ever-approaching hour when he must produce a *Murri* or face the wrath of Gerry Carlyle. And although he knew it was coming, still the demand arrived as a bit of a shock on the beginning of the sixth day.

"Mr. Strike." Not once had the girl dropped her shield of formality. "I've been pretty patient with your repeated sidetracking of my request for a *Murri*.

"But our visit here is about over. We leave in forty-eight hours. To remain over during a Venusian night would mean a tiresome and dangerous journey home. Come on now—no more stalling."

Strike looked at the girl. "What if I refuse?"

Gerry smile glacially. "Your company would hear about it at once. You were ordered to assist us in every way, you know."

Strike nodded, shrugged.

"All right. Just a second while I—"

The rest of his sentence was lost in a clatter of footsteps as Ransom came down the metal stairs with a curious piece of apparatus in his hands.

"Thought you'd be needing this, Tommy," he said significantly with a disgusted glance at the girl.

"Yeah, I sure do." Strike fitted the contrivance to his body by shoulder straps.

"Now what?" Gerry wanted to know. "Do you need special equipment to find a *Murri*? What's that contraption for, anyhow?

Strike adopted a professorial attitude.

"The power unit of this 'contraption' consists of a vacuum-tube oscillator and amplifier and the receiver unit of an inductance bridge and vacuum-tube amplifier. There's also a set of headphones"—he held them up in classroom style—"and an exploring coil.

"The bridge is energized by a sinusoidal current, brought to balance by appropriate resistance and inductance controls. If a conductive body comes within the artificially created magnetic field of the coil, eddy currents set up in the conductive mass will reduce the effective inductance of the exploring coil, serving to unbalance the bridge. This condition is indicated in the headphones—"

"Stop! Stop!" Gerry covered her ears with her hands. "I know an ore-finding doodle-bug when I see one! I just wanted to know why you're carrying it with you now."

"Oh, for protection."

"Protection against what?"

"The natives."

Gerry stared. "Natives. Those scaly, fish-faced rummies that skulk around just out of sight in the fog? Why, those timid little things wouldn't hurt us—they couldn't. Besides, how'll your doodle-bug protect us against them?"

"Why, they're very clever at hiding in the mist and this metal indicator will reveal their presence if they get too close. You see, all the natives in this sector wear gold teeth!"

Someone tittered and Gerry flushed. "If you please, Mr. Strike, let's stick to business and keep the conversation on an intellectual plane. A good joke has its place but—"

"That's no joke," Strike said with a touch of bitterness. "It's a fact. Ever since Murray made his first trip to Venus the natives have gone for gold teeth in a big way. They took Murray for a god, you know, and emulated him in many ways.

"He had several gold teeth, relics of childhood dentistry, so the natives promptly scraped up some of the cheaply impure gold that's found around here and made caps for their teeth. As for their not hurting us, Miss Carlyle, that remains to be seen.

"It has always meant trouble when one of you animal-catchers tries to mess around with the *Murris*. You'll understand me better in a few minutes." He shrugged and twitched his eyebrows. "I'm just being prepared."

"Rats! Mystery, generalities, trouble—but no explanations! Your evasive hints of reasons not to touch the *Murris* just fascinate me all the more. I wouldn't drop the hunt now for all the radium on Callisto!"

"All right," Strike capitulated curtly.

"Let's go." He struck off straight through the mist as if knowing exactly where he meant to go. In five minutes he halted before a mighty cycad peppered with twelve-inch holes which housed a colony of at least fifty of the famous *Murris*.

"There you are," said Strike with resignation. *"Pseudo-simia Murri."*

GERRY completely forgot to be indignant at Strike's holdout. She was swept away in a gale of merriment that overcame the party at sight of the strange creatures.

Perhaps half of the colony were in constant motion, scrambling round and round the huge bole of the tree, up and down, popping in and out of their holes, out along the mighty frondlike branches and back frantically. The others simply sat watching in solemn indifference, occasionally opening their pouting lips to ask sorrowfully—*"Murri? Murri? Murri?"*

They were well named. Though soft and grayish-brown, with scanty hair growth on their backs, their size and antics did resemble terrestrial simians. With their tremendous nasal development, they looked much like the Proboscis monkey.

And this very de Bergerac beak of a nose made their name even more appropriate, for Sidney Murray, Stanhope's co-explorer, was famous throughout the System for having the hugest and ugliest nose extant.

The *Pseudo-simia Murri* colony presented to the eyes of the fascinated watchers a hundred facial replicas of Sidney Murray, spinning and dancing fantastically around the tree.

"Oh!" gasped Gerry finally, wiping laughter's tears from her cheeks. "Oh, but this is precious. Who—who named them?" She struggled mightily with a series of bubbling chuckles.

Strike looked lugubriously at her. "Murray himself named 'em. He has quite a sense of humor."

"Sense of humor! Oh, it's colossal!" She took a deep breath. "What a sensation a dozen of these cute little butterballs will make in London. What a prize!"

"You haven't got them in London yet," Strike pointed out, keeping one uneasy eye on the indicator of his "doodlebug."

"If you think anything's going to stop me now you don't yet know Gerry Carlyle." Again she was the arrogant, self-willed woman.

They moved up to the cycad and examined the *Murris* at close quarters. They were quite tame. The close inspection revealed three facts of interest. The first was the presence of a short, prehensile tail equipped with a vicious-appearing sting near the tip.

"Only a weak defensive mechanism," Strike explained, "as Murris live almost exclusively on the datelike fruits of the tree they live in. The sting's no worse than a beesting." He extended one knotty forearm, showing a small pockmark where he had once been stung.

The second was the large brown eyes possessed by the *Murri*, which stared at the intruders unblinkingly with a heart-wringing, hypnotic expression of sorrow.

"They look as if they'd seen all the trouble and woe in the Universe," Barrows said. "Makes me feel like a louse to take them away from their home!"

The third was a heap of strangely incongruous junk piled at the base of the big tree. There were cheap clocks, gewgaws, matches, children's fireworks, odds and ends.

"Offerings by the natives," explained Strike. "That's the legal tender up here. Medicinal weeds and rough gems in exchange for—those things." He gestured at the pile of trash. "Anything fire-producing is especially valuable. The *Murri* is the native's god—because of his resemblance to Sidney Murray, the First God."

There was more laughter, but subdued this time as the party realized that removing one or more *Murris* would be to commit Venusian sacrilege.

"I see now what you meant by 'causing trouble,'" Gerry said. "But it can't be too much for you to handle. It's happened before, I assume, and always blew over. These primitives—if that's your only reason for dissuading us to capture a few—"

"That's not the only reason." But Strike would explain no further.

"More mystery!" Gerry snorted and supervised the set-up of a big net under one of the longer overhanging branches.

Then two well-directed shots snapped the limb and catapulted a half dozen astonished *Murris* into the net. With

incredible agility most of them bounced into the air and scrambled to safety. But one was caught in the tricky meshes. The ends of the net were quickly folded together to form a bag.

"Got him!" exulted Gerry. "Why, that was easy!"

"Sure. But he isn't in London Zoo yet nor even back to the ship."

Gerry gave Strike a withering look, then peered into the net. The Murri lay quiescent, staring up with enormously round-eyed amazement.

"*Murri-murri-murri?*"

Gerry laughed again at this fantastic miniature of the great Murray, mumbling earnestly to himself. "Back to *The Ark*, boys," she cried. "We'll have a lot of fun with this little dickens!"

THE party turned to retrace its steps and then trouble broke out for fair. When the *Murri* had been removed about ten yards from its home tree a violent fit of trembling seized him. He screamed shrilly two or three times and from the *Murri* tree came a hideous shrieking clamor in response.

The little captive burst into a flurry of wild activity, struggling with unbelievable fury to escape. He twisted, clawed, spat, bit. As the carriers bore him inevitably further away from his home he seemed to go absolutely mad, stinging himself repeatedly with barbed tail in an outburst of insane terror.

After a series of heart-rending cries of despair he gave a final frenzied outburst that ended with a gout of pale straw-colored blood from his mouth.

The entire party stopped to stare appalled at the little creature. Gerry Carlyle's shell of reserve was punctured. She looked badly shaken. It was some moments before she could force herself to open the net and examine the quiet little body.

"Dead," she pronounced though everyone knew it. "Internal hemorrhage. Burst a blood vessel."

Strike answered her bewildered glance with melancholy triumph.

"Agoraphobia. *Murris* are the most pronounced agoraphobes in the System. They spend their whole lives on and around the particular tree in which they're born. Take 'em a few yards away and they have a nervous breakdown ending in convulsion and death."

He indicated the dead body in the net. "I could have told you but you wouldn't have believed me. You'd have come to find out for yourself anyhow."

Gerry shook herself like a fluffy dog that has just received an unexpected ice-water shower.

"So that's what you meant when you said I'd never bring one back alive, is it?"

"Partly."

"Partly! You mean there's something else queer about these—"

Strike nodded gloomily. "You'll find out before long. I know what you're going to do. Capture another. Cut off his tail so he can't sting himself. Tie him up like a Christmas package so he can't move hand or foot. Anything to keep him from killing himself by struggling. Right?"

"Right!" Gerry determined.

"Rogers tried all that when he was here, yet he failed."

"And so?"

Strike shrugged. "So you'll fail, too. But don't let me stop—"

"You won't stop me, Mr. Strike. Don't ever think it."

Together with Kranz, the girl rigged up two makeshift straightjackets to hold the captive *Murris* rigidly unmoving. Meanwhile, the other hunters spread the big net again and shot down another branchful of the curious *Murris*. The healthiest pair were quickly strapped up tightly and the party left to the accompaniment of a terrific yapping and hissing and yammering from the survivors of the colony.

Strike and Ransom spent the remainder of the lingering Venusian day resting from their exertions. Activity in that vicious climate quickly sapped the most rugged strength and Strike particularly felt that he had been drained of all energy.

As the light imperceptibly faded Ransom suggested, "I guess *The Ark* will be leaving soon. Now's the best time for 'em to take off. Conjunction."

Strike shook his head.

"No. That tough little wench Carlyle is over there in her ship learning a mighty bitter lesson. She won't leave now. She won't leave for some time," he predicted. "Wait and see."

But only to himself did he admit the fingers of secret joy that squeezed his heart to breathlessness at the thought of seeing that incredible girl again.

CHAPTER IV

The Stolen Shrine

STRIKE was right. As the absolute darkness of Venusian night dragged its black cloak over the trading post light footsteps ran up the stairs outside. Knuckles rapped on the metal door. Ransom opened. There was still warmth in the thick air. It was almost pleasant at that hour. Gerry Carlyle pushed in.

"Mr. Strike," she said and there was a worried crease between her eyes, "neither of the *Murris* will eat. We can't force anything down their throats. And if we free them they immediately have one of those terrible fits!"

Strike shrugged. "So why come to me?"

"Can't you suggest anything to do? They'll starve themselves to death. And dead *Murris* have no market value. I've sworn I wouldn't return without at least one healthy *Murri*, so you've *got* to help me!"

"Nobody can do anything. You'll never take them back alive. I told you that before. Presently you'll believe it. If there's any mercy in you you'll return those two to their home while they're well."

Gerry's eyes flashed blue fire.

"I'm trying to be merciful without compromising my conscience. If humanly possible I'm taking those *Murris* home alive. Now—if you'll only help—we're going to try feeding through a stomach tube. If that fails, with injections. I thought you'd be able to help us in the food selection."

"It's hopeless. Rogers tried that too. When you take a *Murri* away from its home he undergoes such a nervous shock that his metabolism goes haywire. He just can't assimilate anything."

Gerry went away furious but was back within twenty-four hours. She was beginning to show the strain. Her hair was awry, her eyes bagged and bloodshot from lack of sleep.

"Strike," she begged, "can't you suggest anything? They're growing thinner by the hour. You can see them waste away. If you've been holding something back just to—to discipline me I'll say, 'Uncle.' Only please—"

Strike seized the chance to turn the knife in the wound.

"You flatter yourself if you think I'd sacrifice even a couple of *Murris* for the sake of softening you a little."

But the thrust missed its mark. Gerry was lost within herself, absorbed in her battle to bend two insignificant caricatures to her will. "Drat them!" she flared. "They're doing this to spite me. But I'll make them live. I'll *make* them live!"

Forty-eight hours later she was back again, hanging frantically to Strike's sturdy arm. The *Murris'* silent martyrdom had broken her completely. She was a nervous wreck.

"Tommy," she wailed. "I can't stand it any longer. They just sit there, so helpless, so frail, without a sound, and *stare* at me. Those pathetic brown eyes follow me wherever I go.

"They—they're mesmerizing me. I see them in darkness—I see them in my dreams when I manage to get to sleep. It's pitiful—and horrible. Even the crew goes around now with silent accusation in their faces. I can't stand it."

Strike's heart went out to this bewildered little girl, needing a man's comfort but not knowing how to get it.

"You see now why Rogers and the others wouldn't talk about their experience with the *Murris?* Why I said you wouldn't believe me even if I told you?"

"Yes. I understand. Rogers was ashamed to admit what he thought was a weakness. Embarrassed to have anyone think a funny little Venusian monkey could soften him up by just staring at him with those hypnotic brown eyes.

"I—I sent the boys out to find that tree and dig it up whole, *Murris* and all to transport back to earth. I thought that might solve the difficulty. But I see now it wouldn't."

"What!" Strike roared in sudden apprehension. The fools! Not content with stealing the natives' local gods, now they intended to desecrate the whole shrine! "Out there in the darkness? It's suicide!"

Strike leaped for his furs and heating pads, dressing quickly for a sortie into the bitter Venusian night. Gerry looked surprised.

"How do you mean? Are they in danger?"

"The natives have brought nothing

here for trading in the last seventy hours." he returned grimly. "That means trouble. Plently!"

"But surely they're not out at night! The temperature—"

"Doesn't affect them. They evolved from an aqueous life-form and like it cold. Fewer natural dangers for them at night too."

HE strapped on the gold-detector and radio receiver, strode for the door. "You stay here. Roy! Get the beam working!" He seized a light and barged out.

Gerry's mouth thinned out as she slipped her fur cape over her head and determinedly followed Strike down the stairway. There was a brief argument ending with Strike's angry capitulation.

"We can't debate it now. At least make yourself useful. Carry this." He handed her the powerful searchlight and they moved off together.

A new world was revealed in the gleaming swath of the light, everything covered with a thick frost, utterly lifeless and still. Each breath was a chill knife in their lungs. In the intense quiet they heard the faint sounds of the work party hard at the task of removing the *Murri* tree.

A quick run brought them to the clearing. Stationary lights made a ring about the workers, who had already fastened anti-gravity plates to the tree and were loosening the frozen soil. Strike's voice rang out.

"Stop work, men! Grab your tools and beat it back—" He paused. The needle on the detector's dial was jerking spasmodically.

"Quick!" yelled Strike. "The natives are close by! Run for it!"

But the work party, blinded by the lights, gaped stupidly about and called out questions. Strike ran at them, shouting furiously, but the words were jammed in his teeth as he witnessed an incredible sight. One by one the members of the digging party were falling, wriggling and twisting amazingly.

One of them thrust his feet straight into the air and made grotesque walking motions. Another dug his face into the dirt trying to walk right down through the earth. The only one remaining upright turned round and round in tight little circles like a pirouetting ice-skater.

"Good heavens!" cried Gerry unsteadily. "What's wrong with them?"

Strike seized her about the waist. "Gas! Don't breathe! The natives get it from one of these devilish Venusian plants. Gets into the nervous system. Localizes in the semi-circular canals. Destroys the sense of balance!" He started back through the mist toward the station.

But with the third step Strike's world reeled sickeningly about him. He dropped the girl, fighting desperately with outstretched arms for balance. The ground heaved beneath him. Wherever he strove to put his feet it seemed successively to be the sky, the perpendicular bole of a tree, nothingness.

His eyes began to throb intolerably. Terrible nausea shook him and he retched violently several times. He thrashed about so wildly in his efforts to stand upright that his equipment was scattered helter-skelter about the clearing, much of it smashed.

Strike forced himself to lie quietly while the visible world rocked like a storm-lashed ship. He was conscious of the frightened yells of the stricken workmen, a rush of feet, the monosyllabic squeaks and rasps of the Venusians, whose gill-like breathing system filtered out all the poisonous elements of the atmosphere.

Then Gerry's startled scream knifed his consciousness. Just one outcry, no begging for help. But the sounds of her aimless struggle were plain as she was carried away.

Strike sat up. His smarting eyes took in a confused blur of moving figures. The man who had been standing was down now, a literal pin-cushion, bristling with poison-dipped native spears. Already the body was bloating. None of the others, apparently, were injured. Then the horrid vomiting welled up in Strike's throat, and he rolled over to be sick again.

But Strike, on the extreme edge of the clearing, had inhaled only a little of the gas. He lay with his face close to the frozen earth, breathing cautiously, testing every lungful for tell-tale odors, then exhaling vigorously.

Gradually the earth slowed its spinning as the stuff worked off. Strike became conscious of a splitting headache as if every nerve-end in his skull were raw and throbbing. But as he took in

the scene before him all thought of his own discomfort vanished in a wave of horror. The natives were out for revenge and golden-haired Gerry Carlyle was their intended victim!

Strike had underestimated the natives' intelligence. Smarter than he thought, they had recognized somehow in the anti-gravity plates fastened to the tree trunk the greatest threat to the *Murris*. Further, their sluggish wits had puzzled out cause and effect and had gone unerringly to the control unit with its deadly switch, ready to unleash its power with the touch of a finger.

Gerry lay in a limp bundle on the ground, jerking now and then. About her slim body were clumsily fixed at least a half dozen of the anti-gravity plates. And the leader of the Venusians was bending over the switch.

Strike started up in a frenzy, yelling. Rubbery knees promptly sent him to the ground again. Not yet. No strength. He whispered a prayer for something to delay that outstretched native finger hovering over the power unit.

Perhaps he would move it the wrong way and—but Strike went cold all over at the thought. He wasn't sure, but wouldn't that smash Gerry into a bloody pulp, grind her into a shapeless mess?

Strike began to crawl grimly toward the lighted circle and the pile of weapons belonging to the disarmed work party. It was far, too far. He'd never make it. He paused to be sick again, less violently this time. His head was clearing rapidly but too late. He had to delay things somehow.

Strike's hand bumped against his pocket, dipped in and swiftly out again holding his pipe. Still half full of tobacco. He snatched out a lighter and applied the flame, sucking vigorously, fighting the giddiness, blowing great clouds of pungent smoke all about him. The pipe dropped from nerveless fingers and he hunched down in a prayerful attitude, hoping, waiting tensely. Had he failed?"

Zin-n-ng! Plock! It worked! Strike ducked and curled up into as small a ball as possible. In a split second the air resounded with the shrill whines of hundreds of the tiny whiz-bang beetles, armor-protected against the cold, as they hurtled in a cloud to the source of their favorite scent.

Few flew low enough to hit Strike and those were glancing blows that simply left red welts across his back. He saw perfectly the entire scene as his unwitting allies, the whiz-bangs, stormed into the clearing.

It was as if someone had loosed a series of shotgun charges at the natives. The leader of the Venusians dropped as if cathoded when several of the armored beetles rifled into his most vulnerable spot, the throat.

The natives set up a hideous thin wailing. They ducked. They flailed about them with vigorous futility. Finally they broke and ran wildly away into the dark, dropping even their weapons.

FOR awhile the whiz-bangs zoomed back and forth across the clearing but eventually they too vanished as Strike's now-buried pipe gave forth no more enticing scents. Presently Strike stood up, brushed himself off and grinned. This was his moment! Like a conquering hero he strode into the clearing to gaze on the devastation wrought.

The workmen were still prone, sensibly waiting for the effects of the gas to wear off. Gerry leaned like an old rag against the tree, staring with dazed eyes at her deliverer. Her fingers trembled so that Strike had to help her unfasten the anti-gravity plates.

She tried to stand erect but her knees betrayed her and she fell into Strike's ready embrace. He tried to look stern.

"Well, young lady, I trust you've learned two lessons this night. One, that even a Gerry Carlyle can't always have her way—especially with the *Murris*. Two, that a mere man, even if only to make an occasional unwanted sacrifice, can sometimes come in pretty handy."

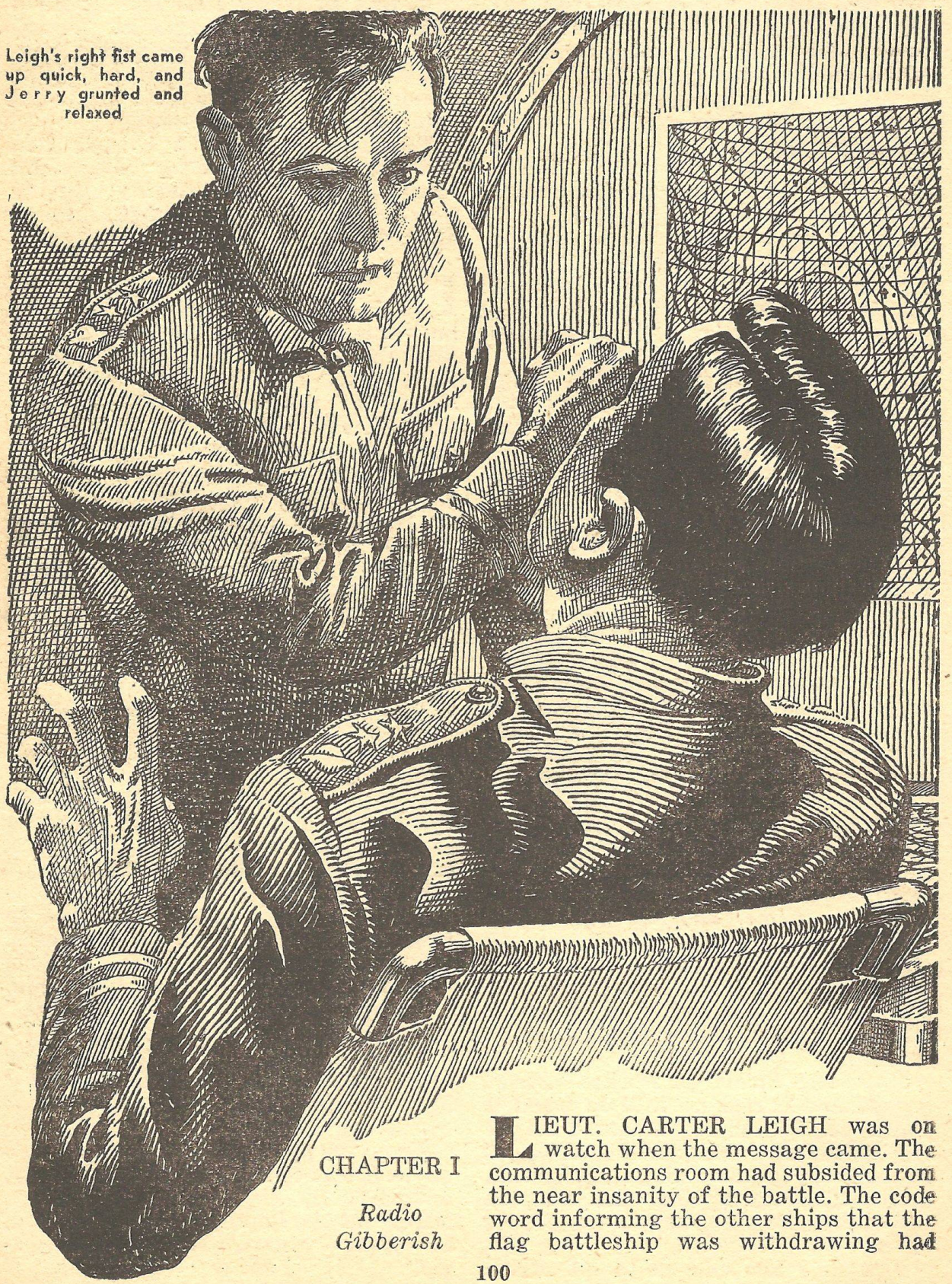
Gerry Carlyle became acutely conscious of her position and she tried to free herself with no great earnestness. Strike laughed. She turned a furious crimson and he laughed at her again.

"Simply a vaso-motor disturbance," she explained frigidly.

"Is that what you call it? I rather like it. I want to see more." Strike kissed her and Gerry's vaso-motor system went completely haywire.

From far up in the invisible branches of the *Murri*-tree one of its inhabitants, disturbed by the night's hullabaloo, leaned out and inquired sleepily through his nose—*"Murri? Murri-murri-murri?"*

a novelet by EDWIN JAMES



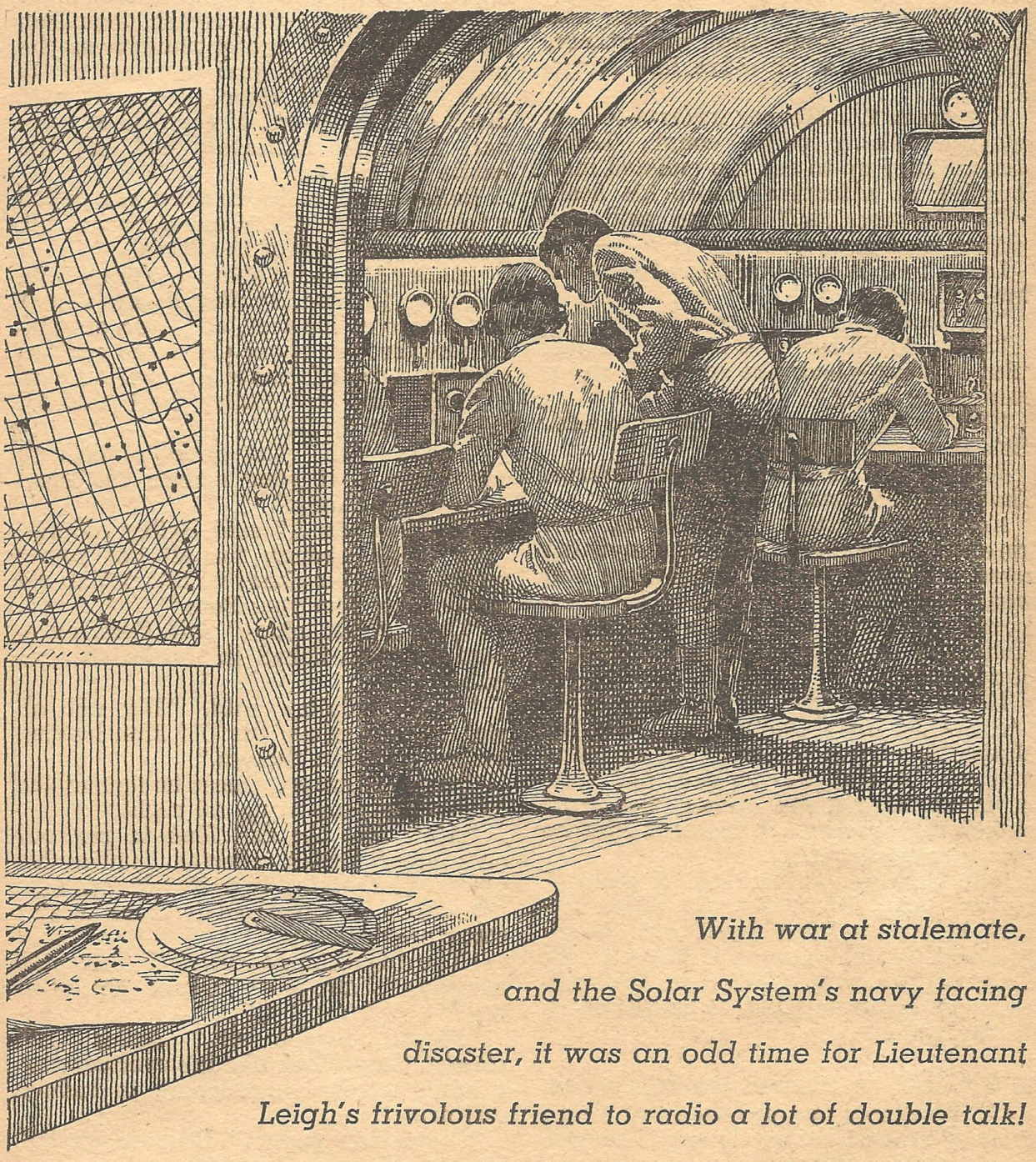
Leigh's right fist came up quick, hard, and Jerry grunted and relaxed

CHAPTER I

Radio Gibberish

LIEUT. CARTER LEIGH was on watch when the message came. The communications room had subsided from the near insanity of the battle. The code word informing the other ships that the flag battleship was withdrawing had

COMMUNICATIONS



With war at stalemate, and the Solar System's navy facing disaster, it was an odd time for Lieutenant Leigh's frivolous friend to radio a lot of double talk!

been flashed. Battle command had devolved on the senior officer present in space, and his com room was swamped with battle orders now. Keys were clicking, buzzers buzzing, lights flashing, intercoms overworked and squawking, the com watch officer quietly going mad.

Leigh lighted a cigarette and relaxed. So far as he knew the battleship hadn't taken a single hit. There had been no disastrous snarls, no traffic jams, no unusual confusion. The Admiral hadn't

called once to ask if the com officer was asleep. Smooth!

The room was almost silent, everyone suddenly aware that all their energy had drained away sometime, somewhere, after the pressure and fever of the battle were gone. Leigh leaned back and considered the significance, importance, and imminence of an extra half stripe of braid.

Radioman 2/c Stevens interrupted his reverie with a polite cough. Leigh straightened up to see the enlisted man standing at attention before his desk.

"A message, sir," Stevens said, extending a piece of paper.

Leigh took it and stared at the typed lines of letters.

"It's in code, sir," Stevens said.

"I can see it is," said Leigh, puzzled. "But it doesn't look like anything we've been using lately."

"It's not from a ship," Stevens said. "It's from the System."

"Oh!" said Leigh. "Yes—of course. That's all, Stevens."

From the System! Leigh could feel his excitement rising. Scarcely anything came from the System these days and what little there was came in a few words of a book code. This was a full cipher. It might be a pseudo-message, of course.

Leigh got up quickly and stepped to the M.C.M. Into the message slot he slipped the piece of paper in his hand and set the dials at the date and time of transmission. He clicked the start switch and sat down. A moment later he was up again, pacing.

The typer began to click. A strip of yellow paper imprinted with black letters began to push itself out. Leigh grabbed it and scanned it eagerly. He dropped it slowly. Gibberish. Methodically, he began to paste it up for entry in the log.

WHEN he reached the last series, he almost dropped the strip. Leigh glanced around hastily to see if anyone was watching. Then his eyes returned, horror-stricken, to the message in his hand. It was worse than gibberish. It read:

PLCOM CART. ALICE IS WONDERFUL. WHY DON'T YOU ANSWER? DON DFRGH

Automatically he turned on the switch marked *ANALYZE*, while he crushed the offending strip in his hand.

Not that it would do any good, he thought bitterly. But why? Why?

* * * * *

Gunner's Mate 1/c Walter Bailey sighted carefully through the telescopic sight and pressed the trigger. Grinning, he saw the small fighter shudder as the projectile exploded just in front of its nose. A moment later the small ship dived erratically out of the field of combat. Then the battleship had left the battle far behind.

Bailey sat back in his chair and pulled a tobacco pouch out of one pocket of his jacket, a pipe out of the other.

"Bailey!" a voice shouted behind him.

Bailey jumped, spilling a small heap of tobacco at his feet, and spun around. A familiar face above the space garb of another gunner's mate grinned at him.

"Don't do it!" Bailey said shakily. "Don't ever do it."

"Heck, Walt," the other replied. "I can't help it if your name's the same as the Old Man's."

"Neither can I," said Bailey soberly. "It's tough enough for all the young punks to kid me about it. But not an old space mate like you, Pete."

"Okay, Walt, okay," said Pete, unrepentent. "We licked the socks off 'em, huh?"

"Yeah," Bailey said. "We did all right. Can't figure the Old Man leaving before it's over, though."

"Just a skirmish. Guess he figures the others can mop it up all right."

"Ain't like the Old Man to run out on a fight," Bailey reflected, lighting his pipe and beginning to puff industriously. "Wouldn't be surprised if there wasn't something else up."

"The Big One, you mean?" Pete said eagerly. "You think maybe it's coming?"

"Maybe, maybe not," Bailey said slowly. "Don't look like it's ever coming. I heard maybe we're going to have a visitor."

"Inspection party?" Pete suggested, his face showing dismay.

"Nope. Something big—from the System."

"Yeah?" Pete said hopefully. "Mail, you think?"

"Maybe," Bailey said, his eyes lighting up. He reached into a pocket and pulled out a packet of pictures. "Five years old," he said proudly.

"Ain't never seen her, have you, Walt?"

Bailey's face clouded over.

"The wife sends me pictures regular."

"Maybe'll be a new one," Pete said. "We ain't had mail for over three months. Oughta be some."

"Gotta be some," Bailey said, and his mouth tightened.

"Yeah, Walt, yeah," Pete said, his eyes roaming up and down the small corridor. "We're off watch. Might as well sack in."

Bailey folded his pictures and carefully replaced them in his pocket.

"No time like the present," he said.

SPACEMAN 2/c Samuel Rush stopped shaking and began removing his space suit. A glad feeling of relief shot through him as he fumbled with the air-tight fastenings. They were leaving the battle, and there hadn't been a call for emergency damage repair. No hits at all. He was safe, and he was through his first battle.

"Okay," said the Bosun's Mate. "All you men grab a rag and a can of polish."

In the distance Rush could see the sweepers already coming down the corridor. He took a can of polish and a cloth as they were handed out.

"All the brass gotta shine," said the bosun's mate. "Put your elbows into it."

They put their elbows into it. But once the bosun's mate was gone, work slackened.

"All the brass gotta shine!" said Rush's neighbor. "He's got brass on the mind."

"Yeah," said Rush. "You'd think they'd let us relax a little after a battle. I got half a mind to take it easy anyway."

"Half a mind is right, Sammy," an older spaceman interjected. "That wasn't a battle; that was a skirmish. Two or three of their scouts got cornered here and we happened to be close by. As for relaxing, that's what we do most of the time, what with the way the war is going and everything. Wait until you're in a real battle—maybe even the Big One—then you can complain."

"Aw, you fellas are always talking about the Big One," Rush complained. "I don't think there's ever gonna be a Big One. We might as well all quit and go home."

"That ain't a nice way to talk," said the other icily. "There's gotta be a Big One. Things can't keep up like this, doing nothing, seeing nothing, shooting at nothing. Things are going to start popping one of these days."

"Yeah?" said Rush. "And what'll we be doing? Polishing the brass! There ain't no sense to it."

"I understand there's somebody big coming from the System," said Rush's neighbor. "That's why we pulled out."

"Maybe somebody's coming with a little sense," Rush said. "Gee! Maybe the war is over!"

The older spaceman turned away in disgust, then swung back.

"See here, Sammy!" he said, shaking his finger on Rush's face. "Get this clear! This war ain't ever gonna be over until we lick those cold-blooded Procyon devils or they lick us. I know. I've seen 'em, done business with 'em, fought 'em. They've decided there ain't room enough in the galaxy for both of us, and, by golly, that's all right with us, except it's them's gotta go!"

He spun on his heel and moved off. Rush sneered at his back.

"That's all he knows! I was in the System three months ago. They were talking about peace then. There was a big movement going with some big politician at the head of it."

"Yeah?" said his neighbor. "What you know! Maybe I wouldn't like to get back to the System!"

"Gee!" said Rush and mused about the fleshpots of home while he lazily rubbed away at the brass. . . .

CARTER LEIGH was on his bunk, trying to straighten out the involutions of a riddle, his hands under his head, his forehead wrinkled, but the elusive curves always disappeared into the past. Finally he gave up and followed them. . . .

"—I need not review in detail the events leading to the war with Procyon," the speaker—some brass hat from the Navy—was saying. "You are as familiar with them as I am. Suffice it to say that soon after our discovery of interstellar flight we visited Procyon, found it circled by inhabited planets, and its inhabitants, very much like ourselves in outward appearance, at the same stage of development. The news was received uproariously all over the System, and

trade was immediately begun resulting in the mutual benefit of both. . . ."

"Lucky dog!" whispered Don out of the corner of his mouth.

"Lucky, yourself," whispered Cart.

"Sh-h-h!" whispered the newly-commissioned communications officers around them.

"—But the Procys weren't satisfied with trade agreements and treaties. They began demanding more and more. They sent spies to discover our industrial secrets and processes. When our expeditions arrived at the stars assigned us, they found the Procys already there, claiming the treaties invalidated by our actions. And then we found them prying into our military secrets, our space ships, our arms, our codes and ciphers. At that moment we rebelled and ordered every alien out of the System until new treaties could be settled defining . . ."

"Assigned to space duty, aboard the flag battleship, no less," muttered Don. "How do you do it?"

"You've got the job," whispered Cart. "The Navy central cryptographic office. Leaves, liquor, girls—that's the life."

"Aw, Cart. You know I'd give my right arm to get out there."

"I know, Don. But you've got the important job!"

"Sh-h-h!" whispered the young ensigns on either side.

"—They descended on the System, establishing lines just outside Pluto's orbit, and issued an ultimatum. That infamous message: 'The galaxy is ours. Stay within your system! We will consider any other action aggression and a declaration of war. Do not come out or we will destroy you completely.' "

The speaker's voice was thick with emotion. The young officers in their bright, new space uniforms felt lumps rise in their throats and steel enter their veins.

"We went out. In one great running battle we pushed them back almost six light years. And there we stopped, halfway between our system and theirs. And there we are still. It is stalemate, gentlemen, a stalemate only you and your fellow officers can break. It is the job you have been trained to do!"

"That's you, Don," said Cart. "It's up to you, boy, you and all the brains in the cryptographic office. Figure it out for us."

Don nodded slowly. Cart felt a fleeting moment of envy for Don's versatility which could encompass the most outrageous youthful escapades and the most abstruse philosophical problems. The envy became tinged with pity for the seriousness with which Don took the responsibility of his mind and the self-torture with which he assumed the problems of the universe. Then, suddenly, it was pride in knowing Don and being his friend, in the knowledge that Don was a member of the human race, in the belief that he would succeed where others had failed.

"—Most of you have been assigned to the fleet, a few of you to cryptographic offices in the System. Above and beyond your regular and routine duties, you will have the responsibility for the solution of our problem: the construction of an unbreakable code or cipher. Wherever you are, whatever your position, that problem must be the companion of your waking hours. Upon you rests the life or death of our solar system. Upon you rests the future of the universe."

After the exercises were over, it was time for farewells.

"Shove 'em back where they belong, Cart," Don said, in the inarticulate moment of parting.

There were no words for grown men to say.

"It's up to you, Don. You can do it."

"Maybe," said Don, and, in an attempt to lighten the mood, "just picture me sitting there in that dull old office all day long while you're out there in the midst of the battle, fighting, preserving the System, really living."

CHAPTER II

Stalemate

AT last Leigh removed his hands from under his head and sat up.

Life on the battle front had not been all heroic fighting, not particularly heroic and certainly not much fighting. And, he supposed, life in the System had not been all cakes and ale.

The stalemate continued, much the same as it was five years ago. The lines were rigid—as rigid as anything could be in space. An occasional bit of action

when a patrol squadron was discovered and outnumbered in a sector.

But no big battles. Nobody dared. It was too dangerous when plans had to be made light years away, months away in hyper-flight time. By the time they were ready to be put into operation conditions would have changed. And orders could not be changed to fit the changing conditions, not when the codes were broken so easily.

They had tried at first—disastrously. The System forces had launched a couple of big attacks and been sent reeling back to recoup slowly. The Procys had tried once and they'd been in trouble for a while. They didn't try it again; they were a logical people, no foolishness about them, no romance, no fantasy. They accepted things as they were, not as they might be or as they wished they were. They accepted the fact of the stalemate and waited patiently for the System to get tired and give up.

That was it, then. No unbreakable ciphers or codes. The war would go on and on like this, until someone gave up or ran out of resources to keep up a huge fleet six light years away. And it wouldn't be Procyon.

And now this. Insane or senseless. Leigh shuddered at the thought of the Old Man. He remembered the message:

CART. ALICE IS WONDERFUL. WHY DON'T YOU ANSWER? DON.

WALTER BAILEY rolled onto his side in his bunk and held the pictures out at a proper distance. What a little beauty, he thought. She looks like her. That's what everyone says. He could see her standing there now, saying good-by.

"It's going to be a girl, Walt," she had said, "for you."

"And it's gonna look like you," Walt had said huskily.

"Don't be away so long this time, Walt," she said lightly. "You hear?"

"I won't, honey. I won't."

"Settle it quick," she said. "You can do it. All your buddies say you're the best shot in the fleet."

He smiled.

"Well, maybe not quite as good as that."

Suddenly she was in tears.

"Oh, Walt," she wailed. "I didn't want to. I promised myself I wouldn't. But I can't help myself. I just can't."

"That's all right, honey. Go ahead. Maybe it'll do you good." His eyes searched out the dull-black bulk of the ship waiting to take them back to the fleet. "I gotta go, honey."

She was wiping her eyes.

"I know, Walt."

"Write me regular!"

"Every day. Maybe twice a day."

"Send me lots of pictures!"

"Oh, I will!"

Finally he tore himself away. When he looked back she was smiling and waving. That's how he remembered her, smiling and waving. . . .

She *had* written. It made a big bundle, even in the microfilm versions, since the mail was brought so seldom. Three months since the last mail.

Oh, let there be mail! he thought in an agony of prayer. He could stand anything if only there was mail. . . .

Samuel Rush lay idly in his bunk and smothered a yawn. If only there were something to do, something to relieve the unutterable boredom. If he were in the System he knew what he would be doing—seeing the spots, dancing, kidding the girls. He'd never forget the last one, just before he left. What a send-off!

HE remembered what had happened: The blonde had leaned over close.

"What do you wanta go out there for, Sammy boy? Stick around and we could have a lotta fun."

"Oh, I don't know—" Sammy began.

"Sure, Sammy," said Frank, on the other side of the table. "It's gonna be over in a couple of months anyway. I got it straight from a guy who knows."

"We sure hate to see you go," said Frank's girl, a sultry brunette. "It's really been fun."

"And could be more," breathed the blonde in his ear.

"Yeah," said Sammy shakily. "Yeah."

"Shoulda got you a job in essential industry," Frank said. "Like me. You wouldn't have got drafted. Ain't like we ain't doing our part, eh, kid?"

His girl nodded brightly.

"Ain't like the war's gonna last for a long time, either," Frank went on. "Can't go on like this forever. We're gonna make peace with 'em. They're just like us, you know. They don't like it any more than we do. Make peace, I say. Trade—that's what makes good times."

"Yuh think there's a chance?" Sammy asked.

"Listen!" Frank lowered his voice. "Just today me and the girl joined a group called Citizens for Peace. You'd be surprised the number of people they got signed up—and the names of some of the big ones, too. Say! Why don't you join? You might get it started out in the fleet. Then we really would get something done. How about it, Sammy?"

"Yeah," said Sammy, his interest rising. "I might at that. I got a few hours in the morning before I report."

"And say," Frank added, "if you did some good work out there the big boys in the group wouldn't forget it. It might mean a lot to you."

"Yuh think so?" said Sammy.

"Gonna talk all night?" breathed the blonde. . . .

Rush smiled for a moment before his expression relapsed into boredom. Would he like to be back there! He should have got a job in essential industry like Frank said. Or a deferment or something. What's the use of being drafted? Just to polish brass and sweep the floors.

Maybe it wouldn't be so long now. Maybe the war was really over or maybe they were coming out to call it off. Rush decided to think about the blonde again. . . .

"Rotten politics!" said the Admiral. "Confound all politicians!"

"It isn't quite as bad as that, Admiral," said the Executive Officer.

"Douglas!" said Admiral Bailey, "it's worse!"

He leaned back in his heavy leather chair and brooded.

"Everybody in the System thinks he can fight this war better than I can," the Admiral said bitterly. "I ought to do this; I ought to do that! When I can't do anything and they know it!"

"It's easy for people to forget," said the Exec.

"Next thing you know they'll forget there's a war on. And that's one thing they can't do."

Through the weathered face of the middle-aged spaceman shone the iron determination and rigid self-discipline that had carried him from the lowest to the highest rank in the Navy.

"If that wasn't bad enough," he went on gloomily, "they have to send me politicians to 'review the state of the war!' Don't we send in reports regularly? Don't they know conditions haven't changed in almost ten years?"

The Exec cleared his throat.

"Top Secret reports say there is growing dissatisfaction among the people with the progress of the war."

"Of course they're dissatisfied," said the Admiral. "I'm dissatisfied. You're dissatisfied. Everybody's dissatisfied. But what do they expect to do about it?"

"I've had letters, sir," the Exec said hesitantly, "that there's quite a movement to make peace."

"Peace!" Admiral Bailey exploded. "Never! What do they think that would get them? Right back where we started. Confined to our own system by a pack of cold-blooded rats. Never!"

"They insist even that would be better than continuing a ruinous war which shows no signs of ever ending."

"That's what they want—those Procyon vermin! That's what they're waiting for. Never," the Admiral said slowly, "never while I have breath left in my body will I consent to such a cowardly, suicidal measure. Rather than that I would lead the fleet in one last effort against Procyon even if I knew we didn't have one chance in a million."

HIS steel-colored eyes flicked upward. "I realize that is treason," he said calmly. "You are at liberty to report me if you choose."

Douglas flushed hotly.

"Admiral Bailey," he said, "if you feel that I am capable of such an action you should replace me. If it came to the situation you suggest, I would be the first to back your proposal. Heaven knows," he said bitterly, "it would be better to be wiped out entirely than to exist on sufferance."

"I didn't think I had misjudged you, Douglas," said the Admiral. "But the big question is: what are we going to do about it?"

"What can we do about it?" asked the Exec gloomily.

"We could break the communications bottleneck."

Douglas shook his head wearily.

"The best minds of the System have been trying to do that for ten years—without success. If they can't come up with something new, what chance have we?"

"I know," said the Admiral heavily. "We keep going over it and over it, and

we never get anything. But there has to be a solution to the problem. The presence of a problem implies a solution."

The Exec nodded.

"I feel the same way about it as you do. There seems to be something forever at the back of my mind, the answer to everything, if only I could drag it out and look it over."

"Plans made back in the System are no good," said the Admiral. "They can't be radioed to us because there's no safe code or cipher. And the time lag for physical transfer is too great."

"That's been demonstrated rather bloodily," said the Exec drily.

The Admiral drummed on his forehead with his fingertips.

"If we lay plans out here we still can't transmit the orders. Even with short-range radio there's always the danger of a radar-blank Snooper."

"Sight signals and physical contact present the same problem and danger—a concentration of that many ships in so small a space is practically begging for destruction and might stretch the line so thin Procyon could break through. Not to mention how they are going to be called together without letting Procyon in on it."

"There's no fleet central clearing office," said the Admiral.

"Immobilized, it would be a sitting duck," the Exec said. "Mobile, it would still be tracked down quickly from the number of messages it would have to send, besides being practically useless while moving around."

"It's no use, Douglas," said the Admiral wearily. "We're too evenly matched, Procyon and the System—arms, speeds, communications, tactics, all about alike. If we could only get a little edge—just one message that we know Procyon couldn't decipher! But the M.C.M. is too good. We're like two identical boxers, each knowing where the other is going to strike next. We'll just keep circling and circling until one of us falls over from exhaustion or gives up. And the Procys are too cold-blooded to do that."

They sat, mutely, considering the dark future. The Admiral broke the silence.

"And now—now they send me this—this—I can't even remember his name!"

"Potter, sir," said Douglas. "Solar Congress Representative Ambrose Potter."

"The very name sickens me," said Admiral Bailey savagely. "No good will come of this man's visit, Douglas, mark my word."

"We'll have to treat him with all due respect, sir," said the Exec.

"Respect, yes," said the Admiral. "In fact, I think we will respectfully turn his stomach a little."

CHAPTER III

Potter Is For Peace

THE huge, dull-black space ship hung motionless in space, waiting. The wait was not long. Within ten minutes a small, silvery ship had nosed its way to the black one's side, was engulfed in an opening that appeared, and had vanished from sight.

Representative Ambrose Potter was welcomed aboard with the respect due his position and his mission. As he stepped from the lock, a vice-admiral and several lower ranking officers were waiting to greet him. Potter assumed his most pompous, cold, congressional air.

"Representative Potter?" the vice-admiral said. "Glad to have you aboard. I am Vice-Admiral Douglas, executive officer to Admiral Bailey."

Potter nodded slightly as Douglas introduced the departmental heads who had accompanied him.

"Admiral Bailey was anxious to greet you in person," said the Exec, "but official duties demanded his attention. He is waiting for you now."

"Very well," Potter said coldly.

The officers did an about face and escorted the representative down the spotless corridor. At the end of it they entered an elevator. When the doors slid open again, they stepped out into a polished, ordered, but small and simple room at the opposite end of which Potter saw a graying head bent over a desk.

"Admiral Bailey, Representative Potter," said the Exec.

The man at the desk got up quickly and moved over to the group. Potter felt his face grow stiff as he sized up the Admiral. Here was a man who would be

hard to persuade to any course other than his own.

"My credentials, sir," he said, handing over a sheaf of papers.

The Admiral handed them to the Captain, without looking at them. Potter, in turn, felt himself being surveyed, estimated, and cast aside. In spite of himself, he grew angry.

"Tell me, Mr. Potter," the Admiral said easily, "to what do we owe the honor of this visit?"

"To a dissatisfaction on the part of the Government and the people of the Solar System with the progress in the war with Procyon," Potter said slowly.

There, he had hit him, Potter thought. A flush crept over the Admiral's face.

"Indeed," the Admiral said, his voice controlled. Then he turned to the other officers. "Continue with your duties, gentlemen—all except Admiral Douglas."

When they were gone, the Admiral turned to Potter again.

"And what is your mission here, Mr. Potter?" he said, but before Potter could answer the intercom buzzed. The Admiral walked to it, talked briefly, and turned to Potter again, his face red.

"I have just been informed, Mr. Potter," he said, in a quiet voice his officers recognized as a danger signal, "that there was no mail on board your ship."

"Should there have been?" Potter asked calmly.

"I have a standing order that every ship coming to the fleet be loaded with as much mail as possible."

"You have no authority to issue such an order," Potter said in his best legal tone.

"I have authority over every ship leaving the System," the Admiral said, his eyes glinting.

"But not over my ship. It is under my personal command, and I am responsible only to the Solar Congress."

Admiral Bailey dismissed that statement with a wave of his hand.

"We will leave that for the authorities to quibble about. The fact remains—your ship came out empty. Why?"

"I refused to accept responsibility for the mail the port authority delivered to me."

The Admiral's voice was low but vibrant.

"Again, why?"

"There is no reason I should stand here being questioned like a schoolboy," Potter said stiffly. "But I have no objection to your knowing the reason. I am a non-combatant, and I did not desire to step beyond the rules laid down for such by long standing agreement."

"And you consider the delivery of mail a combatant mission," said the Admiral slowly. He lifted a hand briefly to keep Potter from breaking into speech. "I see you don't understand. If you had been picked up by a Procyon ship you would have been blasted out of space before you could say the first syllable of your meaningless phrase."

AGAIN the Admiral stopped him. "You don't understand either what it means to men who have been fighting for you in the loneliest places in space to receive their only reminders that there is really happiness and love waiting for them back in the System instead of it all being a dream. You don't understand what it is to wait for mail for three months and then have a ship arrive empty. You will probably say in your report that the morale of the men is low. In *my* next report, Mr. Potter, I will include the reason for that."

"You needn't be so angry, Admiral Bailey," said Potter, with an odd smile. He reached into a pocket and pulled out a packet of envelopes. "I brought your mail."

For a moment Potter thought the Admiral would do something desperate, but he turned to Douglas.

"Admiral," he said icily. "You will see that those papers are locked up until the arrival of the next mail. On no consideration will you release them until then."

"Very well," the Admiral said, when the letters had changed hands. "What is your mission here?"

He might have added to that "very well" what he implied by his tone: "We know what kind of person you are," Potter thought. But he wouldn't get off as easy as that.

"My mission is to investigate the state of affairs which has held the System forces stalled here for ten years in a war which has been draining the System of its resources, and I may add," Potter paused significantly, "to suggest possible measures."

"I see," said the Admiral slowly. "You have had military experience?"

"No."

"You are an amateur tactician, then?"

"No, but I'm familiar with investigations."

"What experience have you had then, Mr. Potter, to justify your presence here on such a mission?"

"Political experience," said Potter coldly, with a touch of cynicism. "And the party I represent has considerable following and influence."

"You intend to take the direction of the war away from the professionals?" the Admiral asked quietly.

"Isn't it about time?" Potter sneered. "The professionals would fight a futile, suicidal war until the bitter end."

The Admiral stared at him. Potter couldn't resist one last dig.

"If my report so indicates—and I have seen nothing and heard nothing so far to change my mind—we will have peace within six months. . . ."

LIEUT. CARTER LEIGH couldn't prevent a shiver of apprehension when he learned that the Admiral wanted to see him. This was the way it came, innocently, without warning, he thought. Now he would get the ax. And all because of a senseless message.

Leigh opened the elevator doors to the Admiral's office with a sinking feeling not due entirely to the motion of the elevator. He crossed the room with a briskness he did not feel and stood at attention in front of the desk.

"Lieut. Carter Leigh reporting, sir," he said.

The Admiral looked up and surveyed him critically. This is it, thought Leigh. He stiffened himself. The Admiral nodded, as if to himself.

"Yes," he said. "Leigh, I have an important job for you. We have aboard a Solar Congress representative to review the state of the war. I want you to conduct him through the communications department."

Leigh swallowed a lump in his throat and brightened perceptibly.

"Yes, sir," he said.

"Explain the workings of the department thoroughly," the Admiral continued. "Especially I want you to explain the nature of the problem which confronts us in communications and why that problem has kept the war static for ten years."

"Yes, sir," Leigh said.

THE Admiral turned to press a buzzer on his desk. Abruptly he stopped and turned back to Leigh.

"What would you say, Leigh," he said slowly, "if I told you there might be a peace signed with Procyon in six months?"

"Oh, no, sir!" Leigh burst out. "We couldn't do that! It would be suicide—unless we were strong enough to get guarantees!"

A fleeting smile crossed the Admiral's face.

"That's enough, Leigh," he said, and pressed the buzzer.

Captain Douglas opened the door and escorted the representative of the Solar Congress into the room.

"Representative Ambrose Potter—Lieut. Carter Leigh," the Admiral said drily. "Lieutenant Leigh will escort you through the communications department."

They nodded at each other, Potter stiffly, Leigh with a friendly smile.

"I'm sure Lieutenant Leigh will be an excellent guide," Potter said.

Leigh turned back to the Admiral, feeling slightly uneasy with the eyes of the Representative upon him.

"You have your instructions, Leigh," said the Admiral. "You will show Mr. Potter anything he wishes to see and answer any questions he puts to you."

"Yes, sir," Leigh said.

"That's all," said the Admiral.

Leigh led the way to the elevator, drawing back to let Potter enter first. Once the doors were closed Leigh felt the eyes of the other man inspecting him once more. He turned with an engaging smile. Potter's eyes dropped, then lifted again.

"How long have you been out here, Lieutenant?" he asked.

"Five years, sir," said Leigh.

The Representative clucked sympathetically.

"No leaves, I suppose," he said.

Leigh shook his head.

"You must be rather homesick for the System," Potter suggested.

"Yes, sir," said Leigh. "I suppose we all are."

"Yes," Potter said. "I suppose so." He heaved a sigh. "You don't know how sorry I am that I was too old for service."

"I'm sure you're doing a vital job back in the System," Leigh said.

"We do our best with what we have," Potter said philosophically. "Everyone is doing his utmost to win the war."

"Yes, sir," Leigh said.

"We all want to get it over with," Potter said heavily. "The war is taking the best of our young men in one way or another—killing them or wasting the best years of their lives, the formative years, the educational years, the constructive years. We miss them back in the System. Civilization misses them."

"Yes, sir," Leigh said.

They stepped out of the elevator into the corridor and began to walk along it.

"And the war is draining the System of its previous assets, its irreplaceable resources. You don't know what a strain it is on the System to keep a fleet fighting six light years away. The cost is terrible."

"Yes, sir," Leigh said. "I suppose that's true."

"And what do we have to show for it all," Potter said, as if to himself, but Leigh could feel his eyes flicking to his face. "Nothing but the prospect of this deadly stalemate going on and on until the System is destitute, stripped of all its wealth, so feeble it couldn't move out of the planetary limits if it were free to do so."

"Yes, sir," Leigh said through stiff lips.

Potter heaved another sigh.

"Sometimes I think it would be better to make peace with Procyon before it's too late, send the boys home."

"No, sir!" Leigh broke in, unable to contain himself any longer. "We can't do that until we have them licked. That's what they're waiting for; that's what they want. We'd be exterminated."

Again Potter sighed.

"I suppose you're right."

He didn't fool Leigh. That was what the Old Man meant, he thought. This fellow Potter wanted to make peace. He'd watch him from now on. Communications? Potter would find out what that word really meant.

With sickening intensity, the memory returned.

CART. ALICE IS WONDERFUL. WHY DON'T YOU ANSWER? DON.

They stood in the door of the com watch officer's room.

"The messages, once encoded, are given to one of the radiomen. He records it, checks for errors, and sends it out. Each signal is given a surcharge of energy from the same engines which send this ship into hyper-flight. Since the difference in mass is enormous, the speed of the signal is incalculable and the transmission time can be measured in seconds."

Leigh paused to make sure he wasn't leaving Potter behind.

"Go on," said Potter.

"On incoming messages the procedure is reversed," Leigh continued. "The signals are recorded, slowed down to whatever speed necessary, typed, and checked for errors. The messages are then brought to the com watch officer for decoding."

"Don't you use scramblers?" asked Potter.

"Sometimes," said Leigh. "Not that it does any good. The recording is merely played into the M.C.M., which quickly unscrambles it."

CHAPTER IV

Code Machine

QUICKLY Leigh turned to the almost smooth rear wall of the room. The surface was broken only by two slots and a few knobs and dials.

"Which brings us to the M.C.M.," he said. "The Multipurpose Cryptographic Machine."

He gave Potter a moment to look it over.

"It may not look like much," Leigh said. "But there is the reason Procyon can't break through our lines to destroy the System—and also the reason the war has been stalemated for ten years."

"A mixed blessing," said Potter wryly.

"The immovable object," Leigh said, "which does not prohibit the presence of another immovable object—Procyon's counterpart to the M.C.M. And in ten years we haven't been able to find an irresistible force."

"Nor will we," Potter added. "But why does it present such a problem?"

"Because there isn't—or hasn't been—any code or cipher it can't break in a few minutes. It is the end result of a long line of cryptographic progress, an

ultimate which, apparently, the other branch of cryptography—the construction of ciphers—will never surpass."

Potter nodded, as if in confirmation of his own suspicions.

"The M.C.M.'s ancestry can be traced back to two inventions of Twentieth Century," Leigh said, "the ciphering machine and the electronic brain.

"Up to the development of the ciphering machine the progress of the science of cryptography was erratic and haphazard, dependent chiefly on the level of education. When few persons could read, the written language itself was a cipher, but when the reverse was true, interest soared and development was rapid."

Potter nodded.

"Simple substitution of one letter for another," Leigh continued, "was used among the Greeks and Romans, but cryptography was forgotten, like the rest of the sciences, during the Middle Ages. With the Renaissance came small innovations in grilles, suppression of frequencies, transpositions, combinations, and other devices.

"Then came the first great cryptographic invention since Julius Caesar, Blaise De Vignère's tableau, a system of double substitution. The tableau of alphabets was entered with a letter of a key word or phrase written down as often as necessary above the clear. The St. Cyr ruler and the Pinwheel or Disc cipher improved on it, adding complications and irrational alphabets. The last was the basis for the ciphering machines."

Potter stirred restlessly, but Leigh went relentlessly on.

"Meanwhile the science of deciphering was developing, too. The first methods of attack were based on the relative frequency of letters in normal text. With more complicated ciphers, bigram, trigram, syllable, and word frequency tables were constructed to keep this branch of cryptography up with or ahead of the other.

"The 'Vignère tableau' and its variants had the decipherers stumped until a German named Kasiski published a method for attacking double substitutions by searching for bigrams or trigrams which must fall under the same letters of the key word, resulting in repeated combinations in the cryptogram. The number of letters between each set is counted, the figures factored, the greatest common divisor being the length of the key word. The message is rewritten in that number of columns, each column then consisting of a simple substitution cipher."

Leigh looked at Potter and saw his interest was drifting. Doggedly he went on.

"The ciphering machines, which were automatic series of disc ciphers with irrational alphabets, produced what was then a perfect cipher, as a given bigram of the clear would not appear enciphered by the same bigram more than once in four or five hundred appearances. But the machines were turned on themselves, variants on them being used to calculate numerical relationships automatically and sort out resemblances. They could be defeated only by something that was not systematic at all.

"Then these machines were allied with the electronic brain, which, with its myriads of cells, provided a memory. Into them was poured all the cryptographic information which had ever been developed—frequency tables, relationships, methods, everything. And to that was added miniature reels containing infinitely minute microfilms of all the books available."

"To defeat book codes?" Potter asked.

QUICKLY the Naval radioman shook his head. He waved at the machine.

"To speed it up," said Leigh. "They could be defeated anyway. Book codes, dictionary codes—you can get one short message through—maybe. After that the memory cells start piling up evidence, sorting through all possible meanings, scanning them for plausibility.

"We try our new codes or ciphers on the M.C.M. If it deciphers them, we know the Procys will."

"Nothing has worked, eh?" said Potter cheerfully.

"Nothing meets the one inescapable requirement for a field cipher: that it must be capable of holding its secret for as long as it takes to execute an order written in it. The M.C.M. makes short work of everything."

"It's just as I thought," said Potter in a firm voice. "The only answer is peace."

"There's another, better answer somewhere, Mr. Potter," Leigh said with conviction. "Maybe in the axioms of cryp-

tography that we think we've outgrown, like the one Bacon's bilateral cipher illustrates—'the only truly secret system of writing is one that conceals the existence of a secret.' "

The com watch officer approached with a sheet of paper in his hand.

"Some day we'll find it," Leigh said, and he turned to the officer. "Here, you'll see how it works. What do you have, Jerry?"

"Procyon message we just picked up, Cart."

"He puts it in the slot, where the M.C.M. scans it," Leigh said in a low voice. "Then he turns on the Procyon switch and waits for a few minutes."

They waited. The M.C.M. began to click. They walked over and looked at the strip of yellow paper being extruded.

Jerry picked it up.

"Gibberish," he said.

Leigh nodded.

"Every once in a while we send over a lot of nonsense. They do the same thing. It keeps both com forces busy and worried. Jerry will turn on the 'Analyze' switch and in about ten minutes the M.C.M. will print 'Message possibly covertly meaningful but insufficient in extent for interpretation'—the standard phrase when the M.C.M. has decided there is no meaning. And we hope they haven't found the perfect code."

"Not a job for a nervous type," Potter said, moving away.

"The insanity incidence rate among communications officers is the highest in the Navy," Leigh said, and a senseless message repeated itself in his mind. "Sometimes you get a message and it doesn't make sense, but you think maybe it should. And you think about it all the time until there isn't room for any other thoughts and then you go crazy."

Leigh's face worked.

"And all for a few senseless words," he said.

Leigh hesitated with his finger on the button that would send the elevator sliding open. It was one thing to enter the Old Man's den once and escape with one's head, but to do it twice in one day was unheard of. Leigh shrugged it off and pushed the button.

The Admiral looked up as Leigh entered. From that distance his face was unreadable. At short range it was even more enigmatical. The Admiral tapped the side of his desk with a forefinger.

"You must realize the desperation of our situation from talking to Potter, Leigh," the Admiral said.

"Yes, sir."

"You realize that it will take all my time and energy to keep Potter from returning determined to make peace at any cost."

"Yes, sir."

The Admiral's temper showed through.

"Then why am I annoyed by disciplinary matters at a time like this?" he roared.

A muscle behind Leigh's left knee suddenly began to quiver.

"I don't know, sir."

The Admiral grunted.

"The fact remains that I am," he growled. He picked up a sheet of paper from a pile at his left. "What do you know of a message received yesterday from the System?"

LEIGH was surprised he could keep his face impassive.

"It was picked up on my watch by Radioman second class Stevens. I deciphered the message and left it to be analyzed when I went off watch. It was apparently a pseudo-message."

"Gibberish, eh?" said the Admiral.

"Yes, sir."

The Admiral cleared his throat and looked at the paper again.

"Does this sound like gibberish? 'Cart. Alice is wonderful. Why don't you answer? Don.' "

"It doesn't sound like it," Leigh said.

"It either is or it isn't," the Admiral said. "Which is it?"

"It's gibberish," Leigh said firmly. "But it doesn't sound like it."

The Admiral stared at him for a long moment.

"Let's go on to something else. Your name is Carter, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir," said Leigh, unhappily.

"Any other Carters in the communications department?"

"No, sir."

"Anybody call you 'Cart?' "

"Practically everybody," Leigh said hopelessly.

"That just about pins that down, doesn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Know anybody named 'Don?' "

"Lieut. Don Peterson," Leigh said.

"Who is now—?"

"Assigned to the Navy central cryptographic office the last I heard," Leigh said, feeling the noose settle around his neck.

"Tell me, Leigh," the Admiral said slowly. "If you were to see this message for the first time, what kind of message would you judge it to be?"

"A personal message, sir, but—"

"But what, Leigh?" the Admiral said coldly.

"But it isn't, Admiral. It can't be. It means something—what I haven't been able to figure out yet. Lieutenant Peterson is trying to tell me something and I can't read it. I have a feeling that it's important, maybe very important."

Leigh stopped, breathless. The Admiral waited a moment.

"Then you think there's a code statement hidden in those words," he said.

"Yes, sir," Leigh said. "There must be. There isn't any other explanation. "I've been racking my brain in vain."

"What did the M.C.M. say?" the Admiral broke in firmly.

The answer was feeble.

" 'Message possibly covertly meaningful.' "

" 'But insufficient in extent for interpretation,' " the Admiral finished. "We both know what that means."

"But that doesn't mean there can't be a message in it," Leigh said in one last hopeless rush. "If they've found something new they wouldn't have sent it unless it could get past the M.C.M."

The Admiral nodded.

"And you expect to find a meaning where the M.C.M. could not?"

"Yes, sir," Leigh said, but even to himself it sounded woefully weak.

"I'm going to give you plenty of time to think about it," the Admiral said, not without a touch of kindness in his voice. "You leave me no choice, you understand? Personal messages via official channels are expressly prohibited by Rules and Regulations and punishment for a break of that rule is prescribed."

Leigh waited, his head slightly bowed. The Admiral hesitated for a moment and then went resolutely on.

"You will consider yourself confined to the limits of your own quarters until you are called before a court martial. Your meals will be brought to you. You will not step beyond the door to your room under any conditions other than abandon ship. You are relieved of all your duties until further orders."

"Yes, sir," said Leigh, steadily.

"At a later time you will choose a fellow officer to act as your advocate. When our next report arrives in the System, Lieutenant Peterson will have to answer for his part in this. Very well, Leigh! You will go directly to your quarters and remain there until called."

AFTER saluting, Leigh turned and walked firmly to the elevator. Just before the door closed, a thought struck him.

"One thing I think you ought to know, sir. I don't know anybody named 'Alice!' "

When Leigh had gone, the Exec groaned.

"I wish we could show this fellow Potter just one little bit of action before he goes back."

"He'd only be more set in his convictions," said the Admiral. "This way is better."

"I hope it means something to him," the Exec said.

"If it doesn't," the Admiral said grimly. "He isn't human."

The elevator doors slid open. Potter stepped into the room followed by several high-ranking officers. Potter was the only one of the group who seemed happy about anything.

"Well, Admiral Bailey," he said cheerfully, "everything I've seen so far has only reinforced my conviction that a negotiated peace is the only solution to our impasse."

The Admiral nodded sourly.

"We have shown you one side of the picture—our side—the problem we must face every day. Now we are going to show you Procyon's side and what might very well be the System side if your plan goes through."

He held up a hand to silence any protests.

"Later," he said. "First—take your seats facing the far end of the room."

The chairs were lined up, waiting, much like a small projection room except that there was no projector and no screen. The lights slowly dimmed. As they went down, the far wall appeared to glow from within, progressing slowly from translucency to transparency. Within that wall shadows began to move, to group themselves, to come alive. It was a segment of life, a living cube,

they were watching—a perfect three-dimensional movie in color. The illusion was almost too good, because the things that were happening within the cube were not pretty.

"These are films of Procyon's conquest of Sirius," came the Admiral's calm voice, startling in the darkness. "Taken with a hidden camera by one of our agents and smuggled to us just before the start of the war. This is one of the planets—fortunately the only one with animal life."

The things continued happening in the cube. Somebody in the group took a sharp, shuddering breath. The Admiral hoped it was Potter. There was no other sound—the Exec's idea. He had argued, successfully, that silence might better show the Procys as they were—cold, logical, passionless, like the merciless butchers they were.

"Notice the way Procyon eliminates opposition," the Admiral said. "The Sirians were non-human in form and in the chemical stage of their civilization. Procyon saw no use for them, after investigating their various physical and mental qualities—without benefit of anaesthesia."

The Admiral's voice broke a little. In the cube the tortured Sirians were writhing horribly, their mouths opening to emit soundless screams. The Admiral resumed.

"This, of course, is in the spirit of science. Procyon does nothing without a reason. They could hope to gain nothing from the Sirians, and to leave them as they were would have been an act of unbusinesslike mercy. The Sirians might, eventually, have proved a menace."

The scene shifted in the cube before them.

"After removing suitable specimens, Procyon eliminated all animal life by the simple expedient of dusting the planet with a short-lived radioactive powder. Quick, efficient, harming practically nothing. Watch the death agonies of a race only a few hundred years behind us in civilization. They were, unfortunately, incapable of defending themselves."

There were mad riots, crumbling cities, a few last gasps and wriggles, and then quiet.

The camera revolved about a planet where nothing moved.

CHAPTER V

Broken Arrest

POTTER, by the Admiral's side, shifted uneasily as if to get up when the scene went blank, but the Admiral pressed him back.

"Just one more, Mr. Potter," he said, with a bite to his voice. "Those were aliens. I want you to see what happens when Procyon comes in contact with citizens of the System."

The cube filled up again. It was a minor battle. A System cruiser was blazing away at the audience. It was much too realistic.

"These films were taken from a captured Procyon ship. Soon a lucky shot—There! That one exploded just in front of the nose, knocking the control room out of action. Now they can only steer clumsily from the engine room. The rear rockets go next. Then, one by one, the batteries are silenced until the cruiser is left rolling helpless in space, a battered hulk without defenses."

The cruiser grew in the cube until each bent and tattered plate stood out in relief before the cube became featureless.

"The attackers cut their way through the hull, saturated the ship with a paralyzing gas, and entered in air-tight suits. Only a few of the crew had been able to get into suits."

The cube was alive again, showing the grotesque figures of the suited Procys stalking down the corridors, blasting down air-tight barriers, smothering all resistance. The scene shifted to a small room. The suits were gone, and the System men were waking up to stare into the faces of their Procyon captors.

"All files and machines were, of course, destroyed when the capture of the cruiser seemed imminent." The Admiral's voice cracked and then went on. "The following scenes show the Procys using a type of truth serum to drag military information from the officers. The serum is extremely painful, as you can see, and results in a slow disintegration of the mind. After capture of this film, orders were issued that all ships were to be destroyed with all hands

when on the point of being captured."

The Admiral turned his eyes away before he went on.

"The officers, of course, knew nothing of value. This and what you will see next—the testing of the mental and physical capabilities and endurance of the men—illustrated the psychology of Procyon. They get no pleasure out of torture, as such, but they have no aversion to using it when it suits their purpose. They are a logical race, without emotions as we know them, no humor, no pity, no flights of poetry or imagination."

There was a gasp at his side.

"The information they seek here," said the Admiral unsteadily, "is probably not of vital concern to them. But the reactions their psychologists can obtain from men under extreme pain, fatigue, mental torment, might be valuable at some future time—in judging how long such a race might be willing to fight a losing battle, for instance. The physiologists also have their day in determining the external and internal differences between System men and Procys and between the System men themselves. Note the complete lack of passion in their faces as they go about their vivisection. They do not enjoy it; neither do they mind the screams of the men they operate on. Procyon!"

The cube went blank and faded. The lights went up. The officers stood up, blinking.

"These are the people," said the Admiral heavily, "you would make peace with. These are the people you would intrust with the future of the System. It would be such a future as Sirius has."

The Admiral took a good look at Potter. He seemed ill. The Representative walked unsteadily toward the elevator. There he seemed to get a grip on himself and straightened up, turning to face the group of officers.

"We must make a good peace," he said, breathing heavily. "Unless you can show me some way of breaking the deadlock by this time tomorrow, when I shall return to the System, I shall report that peace is our only hope."

The elevator doors closed. The officers silently stared at each other.

* * * * *

"How would you boys like to be back in the System in six months?" said Potter.

"Say!" said Sammy Rush. "Yuh mean that?"

Potter smiled beatifically and nodded.

"What do ya know," said Sammy reverently. "Did you boys hear that? Back in the System in six months! Boy!"

THERE was a rumble of agreement.

"How's that?" said a brawny spaceman. "Who's gonna take our places? Who's gonna hold the line?"

"I have reason to believe," said Potter, "that a peace will be signed with Procyon soon."

The spaceman's lips drew back from his teeth.

"Yeah?" he said. "When that day comes I'll ask for my discharge on one of the Procyon planets where I can get a few of those rats before they get me."

He turned and stalked away, but others came to fill the circle around the Representative and listen to his tales of home and return.

"Say, Mr. Potter," said Sammy, "is it true what I heard? Did you bring mail to the Old Man and none to anybody else?"

Potter made an apologetic gesture.

"I hate to say anything about it, men. I mean—it might be seen in the wrong light. I'm sure Admiral Bailey didn't mean to take advantage of his rank, and it wasn't exactly his fault I was unable to bring mail to you."

"Yeah?" said Sammy.

He didn't look convinced. Neither did most of the others. A low, mutinous rumble came from somewhere in the group and spread. . . .

* * * * *

Carter Leigh paced his room savagely. He paused at the wall and leaned his head against it, his eyes closed. It can't be a joke, he thought; there must be an explanation.

Alice, he thought wildly, Alice—that's the key to the thing. Who is Alice? He didn't know any Alice. He hadn't known anyone named Alice since he was a boy. She was a little girl who lived next door. A little girl!

Leigh snapped his fingers. That was it. It had to be that or nothing. And it might work.

He began to pace back and forth feverishly. If he was right it would mean everything. If he was wrong—well, he couldn't be any worse off than he was.

He stopped pacing suddenly.

What was he going to do, go to the Old Man and tell him this wild idea? Leigh shook his head. He couldn't see himself doing it, even if he could get the Admiral to listen to him. What's more, how was he going to get permission to leave his room? And, at best, it was nothing more than a hunch.

He would have to go it alone, take his chances, and whatever came afterward. His word? There were some things more important than personal pride.

Slowly, cautiously, Leigh opened the door to his room. The hall was empty. He eased the door shut behind him. The click nearly startled him into a cry.

Get hold of yourself, he told himself. Everyone will notice you if you're as jumpy as this. Be bold, and nobody will think anything about it.

Leigh stepped out briskly. The radio room was not far, but it seemed like forever before he was opening the door. For a moment, as he stepped into the room, he thought of it as a refuge. Then he realized that here was his greatest danger, here where everybody knew him.

His only chance was that word of his confinement hadn't reached the radio room. One of the radiomen turned around to look at him. Leigh almost fainted before the man nodded.

They didn't know. Did the watch officer? Leigh brushed it aside. First—he strode to the message desk and picked out a blank. Filling out the top carefully, he quickly wrote down a long sequence of letters and paused for thought.

He stuck the end of the pencil in his mouth and nibbled on it pensively. The wording had to be exactly right. There couldn't be any doubt about the meaning. He tried a few on a piece of scratch paper.

Slowly, carefully, he began to print it on the paper. When he was finished, he read it over again, several times. He nodded. It was right.

Leigh squared his shoulders and took a deep breath. Now came the test.

HE walked quickly into the com watch officer's room.

"Hello, Jerry," he said casually.

"Hi, Cart," said Jerry. "What's up?"

He was unsuspecting.

"Message to be sent right out," Leigh said.

Jerry took the sheet of paper and scanned it.

"Pseudo, eh?" he said, then his eyes widened.

"Not exactly," said Leigh, breathing a little faster.

"What's this at the end? 'Don. Alice is always wonderful. I am wonderful, too. Cart.'" Jerry looked up. "Sounds like something personal to me."

Leigh swallowed and braced himself.

"Now, Jerry," he said easily. "If I wanted to send a personal message, wouldn't I do it on my own watch? This is a new code we're trying out."

"Yeah?" said Jerry.

"This may be the real thing," said Leigh urgently. "Let it go, Jerry!"

Jerry took a deep breath.

"I wish I could, Cart. I'll have to check it with the Captain first."

He reached for the intercom phone. Leigh's hand clamped down over his.

"Let it go, Jerry!"

Jerry shook his head, doggedly. Leigh sighed.

"I wouldn't do this if it wasn't important, Jerry. I want you to remember that."

His right fist came up quick, hard. Jerry grunted and relaxed. Leigh eased his body down behind the desk and glanced around. All the radiomen were busy at their work. No one had noticed.

He picked up the message and walked over to the M.C.M. Flicking the switch for encoding, he inserted the message in the slot. The few moments before the yellow strip began to come out were the longest Leigh ever had to wait. Finally the typer began to click. As fast as it came out, Leigh pasted it up.

First came the date-time group, imprinted automatically. Then the message. In a minute it was done. He flipped the *Analyze* switch.

Leigh took one last look at the unconscious officer and walked into the radio room.

"Here, Stevens," he said. "Send it out immediately. Drop everything else. Urgent."

Stevens gave him an uncertain glance, started to speak, and changed his mind. The habit of obedience was too much.

"Yes, sir," he said, and took the slip of paper.

Leigh stood over him as he recorded the message, checked it, and sent it out. When it was finished, Leigh sighed and

returned to the watch officer's room. The M.C.M. had just finished clicking. Leigh picked up the strip of yellow paper. It began:

MESSAGE POSSIBLY COVERTLY MEANINGFUL

It was done. There was no turning back now. And now that it was over Leigh felt the weight of all the regulations he had broken bow his shoulders. Successful or not, they could never be forgiven. The Navy had no place for individuals.

"So long, Jerry," he said as he turned to go.

Leigh paused in the radio room.

"Stevens," he said slowly. "You'd better look after Lieutenant Masters. I think he has hurt himself."

Leigh walked steadily out of the room and down the corridor. When his own door had closed behind him, he threw himself on his bunk. And waited.

CHAPTER VI

Carroll's Code

JAW jutting, the advocate of peace at any price entered the Command Office.

"Nothing new, Admiral?" asked Potter casually.

The Admiral shook his head.

"Did you expect anything?" he asked, looking up wearily.

"No," said Potter frankly. "Since you hold out no hopes for victory, however, I can see nothing left but peace."

The Admiral swallowed.

"I ask you to consider carefully all sides of the question, Mr. Potter. Consider the attitude of Procyon toward a defeated System. And then decide whether peace is worth so much, and whether there can be such a thing as peace when there is nobody left to enjoy it."

The expression on Potter's face became truly thoughtful for the first time since he had boarded the flagship. He shook his head.

"Although my political future is inextricably combined with the peace movement," he said slowly, "I want you to know that if there had been any hope for victory, even the faintest, I would have returned with a verdict to fight on. But this way is suicidal."

The Admiral's face was set. Potter spoke with even greater earnestness.

"You're in the midst of the fighting. You don't realize what goes on back in the System, what efforts are made to keep you supplied. There is no more than a two-year supply of atomic fuels if used at the present rates. That is only just enough to maintain a bare minimum of existence in the System, to tide us over until we can discover new deposits or develop new methods. If that is used up our case is hopeless. We can never hope to reach and exploit new star systems. Our civilization would relapse into a chemical existence."

"We could retire," said the Admiral.

"We have Procyon stalemated now," said Potter. "We could never hope to achieve the terms we could get now if we exposed our weakness by retreat."

Potter turned to leave. At the last moment he turned.

"The only hope is peace now," he said wearily.

He was gone and the Admiral wore a bitter smile. Idly he tossed a small object in his hand.

The Exec glanced, looked away, and turned back to stare.

"But that's—!" he began.

"The atomic key to Potter's ship," the Admiral agreed. "I removed it on my inspection this morning."

"But that means the ship can't move! Potter can't leave!"

"Exactly," said the Admiral. "And no other key will fit."

He gave the Exec a wan smile.

"Unfortunate, isn't it, how such things get misplaced? Now Potter will be forced to share our fortunes—for a few days at least."

"A few more days of grace," breathed the Exec. "Let something happen!"

The Admiral looked down at his memorandum sheet. His face clouded.

"Send in Lieutenant Leigh," he said.

The Exec shook his head and went to the door.

"Bring in Lieutenant Leigh," he said.

Leigh entered with his guards. He faced the Admiral's stern gaze without flinching.

"You have a long list of offenses against you, Leigh," the Admiral said.

"Have you any excuses for this conduct?"

"I did it for the good of the Navy and the System," Carter Leigh said in a low voice.

"I see," said the Admiral grimly. "For the good of the Navy and the System you violated your word as an officer, breaking the confinement you were trusted to keep without guard; struck a fellow officer engaged in the pursuit of his duties, leaving the communication room without a watch officer; and sent an unauthorized message, possibly with serious consequences to the progress of the war. It adds up to mutiny, Leigh."

"Yes, sir," said Leigh.

"I repeat—have you any excuse?"

"It was vital that the message be sent—and it could not go through regular channels."

"Another personal message, Leigh?" asked the Admiral.

"Apparently, yes." Leigh's voice was still low.

"And what was the purpose of that message?"

"It would do no more good for me to tell you that now than it would have before it was sent," Leigh said. "Only the answer will reveal whether it was worth it."

THE Admiral sighed.

"Again, Leigh, you leave me no choice. You will be locked in a cell until the court-martial convenes to try you. And, I may add, mutiny and your other offenses are more serious than that of receiving a personal message. In time of war, you can be punished with death."

Leigh stood with his head bowed.

The Admiral sighed again.

"Take him away."

Before Leigh and his guards were a step from the desk, the intercom buzzed. The Admiral answered, listened for a moment, and looked up.

The departing group had just reached the elevator.

"Wait a minute," he called.

He listened for a moment more.

"Bring him back, he said. He looked up at Leigh gravely. "It looks like your answer is here."

He spoke into the intercom.

"Let's have it again."

As the message was given to him, he repeated it, motioning for Leigh to take it down.

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
  Did gyre and gimble in the wabe.
"Mine is a long and a sad tale," said the mouse,
  And the mome toves outgrabe.
Tweedledum and Tweedledee
  Agreed to have a battle.
For Tweedledum said Tweedledee
  Had spoiled his nice new rattle.

The Exec started.

"'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland!'" he exclaimed.

Leigh smiled.

"And 'Through the Looking-Glass,'" he added. . . .

Walter Bailey sniffed the air. It was the same old air the ship had had for years.

"What's the matter with you?" said Pete.

"There's something up," Bailey said. "Something's going to happen."

The others scoffed.

"You and your sixth sense!" scoffed Pete.

"Can't you feel it?" asked Bailey. "Everything get's tighter, kind of charged, like with electricity."

They laughed.

"Next thing you'll tell us," said Pete, "is that we're about to get into the Big One."

The laughter was appreciative of Pete's wit.

"Maybe," said Bailey. "Maybe."

The recreation room rocked with laughter.

The P.A. cleared its throat. . . .

When Potter missed the key, he fumed and swore.

"But it can't be lost," he said for the tenth time. "How could a thing like that get lost?"

"I don't know, Mr. Potter," his pilot replied. "It was there last time I looked."

"Someone must have taken it," Potter said violently. "Someone must have sneaked in here and stolen it."

"What good's a key without a ship?" said the pilot. "Or, for that matter, a ship without a key?"

"Who's been in the ship?" Potter asked.

"Nobody," defended the pilot. "Nobody except the Admiral's party on inspection this morning. I been here all the time, slept here."

Potter's eyes narrowed.

"That's it!" he said and started for the door.

The P.A. cleared its throat. . . .

Samuel Rush was dreaming aloud.

"The System!" he said. "Solid ground, women, liquor, bright lights!"

"Yeah," said his friend. "Gee, what I wouldn't give!"

Rush grinned at his friend, his eyes lighting up with hope.

"This guy Potter knows what he's doing. Didn't I tell you he was really something?"

"Yeah, Sammy," said his friend. "Peace! Back in the System in six months!"

"No more battles," said Sammy. "No more shining the brass. No more sweeping. No more nothing. Watch out, System! Here I come!"

THE P.A. cleared its throat. . . .

"Prepare for hyper-flight!" the Admiral said. "Assume action stations! We are about to begin a crucial maneuver. If we are successful, it will be a defeat Procyon will never forget."

The Admiral put down the P.A. hand mike.

"All right," he said. "Let's go over it once more."

"The com officer just called," said the Exec, "to say that the M.C.M.'s report was insufficient in extent."

"Of course," said Leigh. "No one would consider putting a book of children's fantasy into the M.C.M. A machine can't understand or take account of fantasy. It would probably result in a complete breakdown. Even of greater importance is the Procy's cold, logical character. They never could understand or appreciate our humor or poetry or fantasy. And they would never have read 'Alice.'"

"How did you think of it?" asked the Admiral.

"I should have thought of it before," Leigh said sheepishly. "Don and I both practically memorized it when we were kids."

"Now—the message," the Admiral said.

"Well, it starts with the first couple of lines from Jabberwocky," said Leigh, "which Humpty-Dumpty explained to Alice. As Humpty-Dumpty said, it's like a portmanteau—there are two meanings packed up into one word."

"You mean, it's a code?" asked the Exec.

"It's not merely a code," Leigh said, "except in the most general sense—it's an arbitrary language. It can't be solved as a code; it must be learned, since it has no external linguistic referrents. The words in the message have no semantic meanings, but they have been assigned arbitrary meanings by Lewis Carroll. Those meanings can only be learned by comparing the messages and resultant actions. And that takes some time."

"Time enough to do whatever we have to do," said the Admiral grimly.

"It boils down to this," Leigh continued. "Lewis Carroll's books provide an arbitrary language, which, like any book or dictionary code, is unsolvable. But unlike any other arbitrary language it is already available at both ends. We have dictionary codes, of course, but they have all already had several messages transmitted in them—messages like the one notifying us of the rendezvous with Potter."

"Why haven't we used them before?" asked the Exec.

"Because they may be compromised," Leigh said. "They can only be used once with perfect safety." He stopped and thought a moment. "Funny we've never thought of it before. The answer is right there."

"How do you mean?"

The Exec and the Admiral looked up sharply.

"Use them only once! Have them recorded on minute reels to slip into the M.C.M. and used in series. The code can be varied haphazardly for recording by machine. A little bulkier than a cipher, of course, but safe."

There was a pause while they considered the suggestion.

"Even more important, perhaps, is the message here," Leigh said, "which was so important they couldn't trust it to a book code which may have been compromised, so important that they couldn't wait to send out a new code dictionary."

"So important," said the Admiral, "it might end the war right here. You've given me a rough translation of the message. Now please go over it word by word. There can't be any uncertainty over the interpretation. Too much depends on it."

"*Brillig,*" said Leigh, "according to Humpty-Dumpty, means four o'clock in the afternoon—the time when you begin broiling things for dinner."

"*Slithy,*" said the Admiral.

"*Slithy* means 'lithe and slimy.'"

"The Procys," said the Exec.

"Must be," said Leigh. "For *toves* are queer, unearthly creatures; something like badgers, something like lizards, and something like corkscrews. To *gyre* is to go round and round like a gyroscope. To *gimble* is to make holes like a gimblet."

And the *wabe* is the grass-plot around a sun-dial," supplied the Exec.

IT was obvious the officers were delighted with the progress which was being made.

Leigh smiled.

"Because it goes a long way before it, and a long way behind it, and a long way beyond it on each side. In other words, the Procyon ships are gathering near some star—most of them apparently. Some spy must have got back with the information."

"And the star?" asked the Admiral.

"That's the meaning of the next line which was substituted for the original third line of the poem. The mouse's *long and sad tale* was the poem about *Fury*."

"The one that wanted to take the mouse to law," interjected the Exec. " 'I'll be judge, I'll be jury,' said cunning old *Fury*."

"That's it," said Leigh. "And *Fury* was an old dog. Sirius is in the constellation of Canis Major, the Big Dog. It couldn't be the Little Dog, Procyon's constellation."

"Why not?" asked the Admiral with concern.

"There are references in the books to puppies which could have been used," said Leigh. "And the next line reinforces it by substituting *toves* after *mome*. Humpty-Dumpty thought *mome* meant 'from home.'"

"That's settled then," said the Admiral. "The Procyon ships are gathering around Sirius today at sixteen hundred, our time. What about the next verse?"

"Tweedledum and Tweedledee — I think that's Procyon and the System. And, if you remember, the following verse goes:

> Just then flew down a monstrous crow,
> As black as a tar-barrel;
> Which frightened both the heroes so,
> They quite forgot their quarrel."

The Admiral's face broke into a broad smile.

"And we're to be the monstrous crow."

Leigh nodded.

"We break through Procyon's thinly held lines at sixteen hundred," said the Admiral briskly, "leaving the rest of the fleet on alert to stop whatever plan Procyon is cooking up. We swoop down on Procyon, send out a host of predirected automatic rockets loaded with radioactive dust, and let Procyon know we're there."

"They'll have to make peace at our terms," the Exec said excitedly. "They couldn't touch us or the rockets would dust every planet in the Procyon system. And they couldn't stop enough of the rockets to make any difference."

THERE was silence. The smile faded from Leigh's face and his shoulders drooped.

"I'm ready to go now, sir," he said quietly.

The Admiral turned quickly.

"Oh, yes, Leigh," he said severely. "You realize this doesn't minimize your offenses?"

"Yes, sir," said Leigh, squaring his shoulders.

"However," said the Admiral, "we will need every man in the coming attack. I'm going to give you a chance to redeem your minor infractions of the rules by means of your work during the next few months."

"Thank you, sir," said Leigh, gratefully.

"But," the Admiral went on sternly, "these other matters will have to carry over until we return to the System, where"—his voice grew dry—"a grateful government will probably pin a medal on you."

Leigh blushed and began to stammer something foolish when he was cut off by the buzz of the intercom.

"Yes?" said the Admiral.

The receiver squawked.

"Oh, Mr. Potter," the Admiral drawled. "I'll tell you how it is." He raised a quizzical eyebrow at the rest of the group. "We thought the inspection of the representative of the Solar Congress Peace party should extend to Procyon."

The receiver squawked violently.

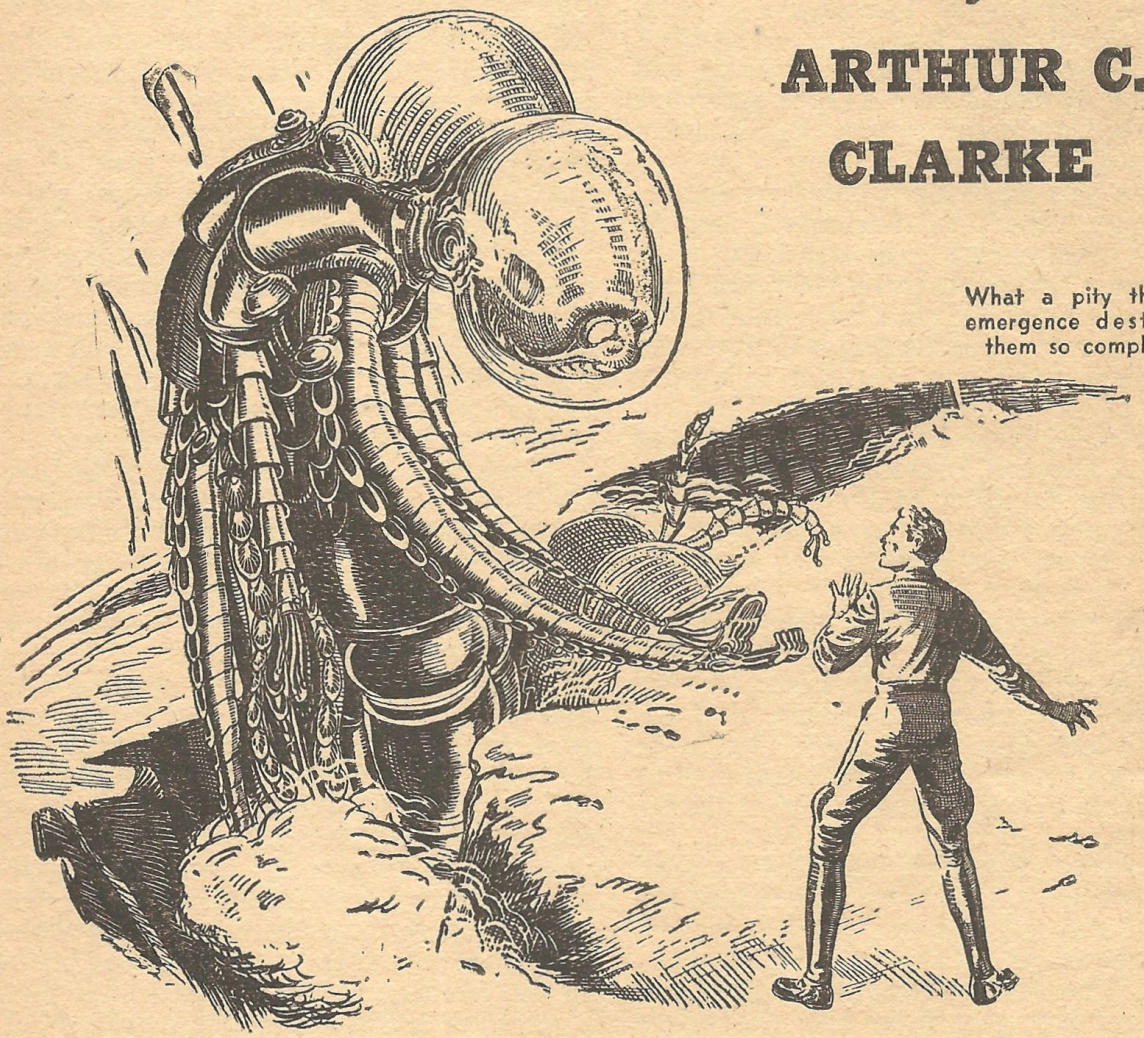
"That's right," said the Admiral. "I said Procyon."

From the other end came nothing but a stunned silence.

The Fires Within

by

ARTHUR C. CLARKE



What a pity that our emergence destroyed them so completely!

To a creature fifteen miles below the earth's crust—

Ordinary rock would be like a cloud

A human being misty as a vacuum!

Supposing creatures actually existed in conditions which would seem to us quite inimical to life—wouldn't they think the same of our world? For instance, a few miles beneath our feet . . .

"THIS," said Karn very smugly, "will interest you. Just take a look at it!" He pushed across the file he had been reading, and for the *nth* time I decided to ask for his transfer or, failing that, my own.

"What's it about?" I asked wearily.

"It's a long report from a Dr. Matthews to the Minister of Science." He waved it in front of me. "Just read it!"

Without much enthusiasm, I began to

go through the file. A few minutes later I looked up and admitted grudgingly:

"Maybe you're right—this time." I didn't speak again until I'd finished . . .

My dear Minister: (the letter began). As you requested, here is my special report on Professor Hancock's experiments which have had such unexpected and extraordinary results. I have not had time to cast it into a more orthodox form, but am sending you the dictation just as it stands.

Since you have many matters engaging your attention, perhaps I should briefly summarize our dealings with Professor Hancock. Until 1955, the Professor held the Kelvin Chair of Electrical Engineering at Brendon University, from which he was granted indefinite leave of absence to carry out his researches. In these he was joined by the late Dr. Clayton, sometime Chief Geologist to the Ministry of Fuel and Power. Their joint research was financed by grants from the Paul Fund and the Royal Society.

The Professor hoped to develop sonar as a means of precise geological surveying. Sonar, as you will know, is the acoustic equivalent of radar, and although less familiar, is older by some millions of years, since bats use it very effectively to detect insects and obstacles at night.

Professor Hancock intended to send high-powered supersonic pulses into the ground and to build up from the returning echoes, an image of what lay beneath. The picture would be displayed on a cathode ray tube and the whole system would be exactly analogous to the type of radar used in aircraft to show the ground through clouds.

In 1957 the two scientists had achieved partial success but had exhausted their funds. Early in 1958 they applied directly to the Government for a block grant. Dr. Clayton pointed out the immense value of a device which would enable us to take a kind of X-ray photo of the Earth's crust, and the Minister of Fuel gave it his strongest approval before passing on the application to us. At that time the report of the Bernal Committee had just been published and we were very anxious that deserving cases should be dealt with quickly to avoid further criticisms.

I went to see the Professor at once and submitted a favourable report. The first payment of our grant (S/543A/68) was made a few days later. From that time on I have been continually in touch with the research and have assisted to some extent with technical advice.

THE equipment used in the experiments is complex, but its principles are simple. Very short but extremely powerful pulses of supersonic waves are generated by a special transmitter which revolves continuously in a pool of a heavy organic liquid. The beam produced passes into the ground and "scans" like a radar beam searching for echoes. By a very ingenious time delay circuit which I will resist the temptation to describe, echoes from any depth can be selected. So a picture of the strata under investigation can be built up on a cathode ray screen in the normal way.

When I first met Professor Hancock, his apparatus was rather primitive, but he was able to show me the distribution of rock down to a depth of several hundred feet and we could see quite clearly a part of the Bakerloo which passed very near his laboratory.

Much of the Professor's success was due to the great intensity of his supersonic bursts. Almost from the beginning he was able to generate peak powers of several hundred kilowatts, nearly all of which was radiated into the ground. It was unsafe to remain near the transmitter, and I noticed that the soil became quite warm around it. I was rather surprised to see large numbers of birds in the vicinity, but soon discovered that they were attracted by the hundreds of dead worms lying on the ground.

At the time of Dr. Clayton's death in 1960, the equipment was working at a power level of over a megawatt. Quite good pictures of strata a mile down could be obtained. Dr. Clayton had correlated the results with known geographical surveys and had proved beyond doubt the value of the information obtained.

Dr. Clayton's death in a motor accident was a great tragedy. He had always exerted a stabilizing influence on the Professor, who had never been much interested in the practical applications of his work.

Soon afterwards I noticed a distinct change in the Professor's outlook, and a few months later he confided his new

ambitions to me. I had been trying to persuade him to publish his results (he had already spent over 50,000 pounds and the Public Accounts Committee was being difficult again), but he asked for a little more time. I think I can best explain his attitude by his own words, which I remember very vividly, for they were expressed with peculiar emphasis.

"Have you ever wondered," he said, "what the Earth really is like inside? We've only scratched the surface with our mines and wells. What lies beneath is as unknown as the other side of the Moon.

"We know that the Earth is unnaturally dense—far denser than the rocks and soil of its crust would indicate. The core may be solid metal, but until now there's been no way of telling. Even ten miles down the pressure must be thirty or more tons to the square inch and the temperature is several hundred degrees. What it's like at the center staggers the imagination: the pressure must be thousands of tons to the square inch. It's strange to think that in two or three years we may reach the Moon—but when we've got to the stars we'll still be no nearer that inferno four thousand miles beneath our feet.

"I can now get recognizable echoes from two miles down, but I hope to step up the transmitter to ten megawatts in a few months. With that power, I believe the range will be increased to ten miles —and I don't mean to stop there."

I was impressed, but at the same time I felt a little sceptical.

"That's all very well," I said, "but surely the deeper you go the less there'll be to see. The pressure will make any cavities impossible. And after a few miles there will simply be a homogeneous mass getting denser and denser."

"Quite likely," agreed the Professor. "But I can still learn a lot from the transmission characteristics. Anyway, we'll see when we get there!"

That was four months ago and yesterday I saw the results of that research. When I answered his invitation the Professor was clearly excited, but he gave me no hint of what, if anything, he had discovered.

He showed me his improved equipment and raised the new receiver from its bath. The sensitivity of the pick-ups had been greatly improved, and this alone had effectively doubled the range, apart from the increased transmitter power. It was strange to watch the steel framework slowly turning and to realize that it was exploring regions which, in spite of their nearness, man might never reach.

WHEN we entered the hut containing the display equipment, the Professor was strangely silent. He switched on the transmitter, and even though it was a hundred yards away I could feel an uncomfortable tingling. Then the cathode ray tube lit up and the slowly revolving time-base drew the picture I had seen so often before. Now however, the definition was much improved owing to the increased power and sensitivity of the equipment.

I adjusted the depth control and focussed on the Underground, which was clearly visible as a dark lane across the faintly luminous screen. While I was watching, it suddenly seemed to fill with mist and I knew that a train was going through.

Presently I continued the descent. Although I had watched this picture many times before, it was always uncanny to see great luminous masses floating towards me and to know that they were buried rocks—perhaps the debris from the glaciers of fifty thousand years ago.

Dr. Clayton had worked out a chart so that we could identify the various strata as they passed. Presently I saw that I was through the alluvial soil and was entering the great clay saucer which traps and holds the city's artesian water. Soon that too was past, and I was dropping down through bedrock almost a mile below the surface.

The picture was still clear and bright, though there were now few changes in the ground structure. The pressure was already rising to a thousand atmospheres; soon it would be impossible for any cavity to remain open, for the rock itself would begin to flow. Mile after mile I sank, but only a pale mist floated on the screen, broken sometimes when echoes were returned from pockets or lodes of denser material. They became fewer and fewer as the depth increased —or else they were now so small that they could no longer be seen.

The scale of the picture was, of course, continually expanding. It was now many miles from side to side, and I felt like an airman looking down upon an unbroken

cloud ceiling from an enormous height. For a moment a sense of vertigo seized me as I thought of the abyss into which I was gazing. I do not think that the world will ever seem quite solid to me again.

At a depth of nearly ten miles I stopped and looked at the Professor. There had been no alteration for some time, and I knew that the rock must now be compressed into a featureless homogeneous mass. I did a quick mental calculation and shuddered as I realized that the pressure must be at least thirty tons to the square inch. The scanner was revolving very slowly now, for the feeble echoes were taking many seconds to struggle back from the depths.

"Well, Professor," I said, "I congratulate you. It's a wonderful achievement. But we seem to have reached the core now. I don't suppose there'll be any change from here to the center."

He smiled a little wryly. "Go on," he said. "You haven't finished yet."

There was something in his voice that puzzled and alarmed me. I looked at him intently for a moment; his features were just visible in the blue-green glow of the cathode ray tube.

"How far down can this thing go?" I asked, as the interminable descent started again.

"Fifteen miles," he said shortly.

I wondered how he knew for the last feature I had seen at all clearly was only eight miles down. But I continued the long fall through the rock, the scanner turning more and more slowly now, until it took almost five minutes to make a complete revolution. Behind me I could hear the Professor breathing heavily, and once the back of my chair gave a crack as his fingers gripped it.

Then suddenly, very faint markings began to reappear on the screen. I leaned forward eagerly, wondering if this was the first glimpse of the world's iron core. With agonizing slowness the scanner turned through a right angle, then another. And then—

I LEAPED suddenly out of my chair, cried out and turned to face the Professor. Only once before in my life had I received such a shock—fifteen years ago, when I had accidentally turned on the radio and heard of the fall of the first atomic bomb. That had been unexpected, but this was inconceivable. For on the screen had appeared a grid of faint lines, crossing and recrossing to form a perfectly symmetrical lattice.

I know that I said nothing for many minutes, for the scanner made a complete revolution while I stood frozen with surprise. Then the Professor spoke in a soft, unnaturally calm voice.

"I wanted you to see it for yourself before I said anything. That picture is now thirty miles in diameter, and those squares are two or three miles on a side. You'll notice that the vertical lines converge and the horizontal ones are bent into arcs. We're looking at part of an enormous structure of concentric rings. The center must lie many miles to the north, probably in the region of Cambridge. How much further it extends in the other direction we can only guess."

"But what *is* it, for heaven's sake?"

"Well, it's clearly artificial."

"That's ridiculous! Fifteen miles down!"

The Professor pointed to the screen again. "God knows I've done my best," he said, "but I can't convince myself that Nature could make anything like that."

I had nothing to say, and presently he continued:

"I discovered it three days ago, when I was trying to find the maximum range of the equipment. I can go no deeper than this, and I rather think that the structure we can see is so dense that it won't transmit my radiations any further.

"I've tried a dozen theories, but in the end I keep returning to one. We know that the pressure down there must be eight or nine thousand atmospheres, and the temperature must be high enough to melt rock. But normal matter is still almost empty space. Suppose that there is life down there—not organic life, of course, but life based on partially condensed matter, matter in which the electron shells are few or altogether missing. Do you see what I mean? To such creatures, even the rock fifteen miles down would offer no more resistance than water—and we and all our world would be as tenuous as ghosts."

"Then that thing we can see—"

"Is a city, or its equivalent. You've seen its size, so you can judge for yourself the civilization that must have built it. All the world we know—our oceans and continents and mountains — is nothing more than a film of mist sur-

rounding something beyond our comprehension."

Neither of us said anything for a while. I remember feeling a foolish surprise at being one of the first men in the world to learn the appalling truth; for somehow I never doubted that it was the truth. And I wondered how the rest of humanity would react when the revelation came.

Presently I broke into the silence. "If you're right," I said, "why have they—whatever they are—never made contact with us?"

The Professor looked at me rather pityingly. "We think we're good engineers," he said, "but how could we reach them? Besides, I'm not at all sure that there haven't been contacts. Think of all the underground creatures of mythology—trolls and cobalds and the rest. No it's quite impossible—I take it back. Still, the idea *is* rather suggestive."

All the while the pattern on the screen had never changed: the dim network still glowed there, challenging our sanity. I tried to imagine streets and buildings and the creatures going among them—creatures who could make their way through the incandescent rock as a fish swims through water.

It was fantastic — and then I remembered the incredibly narrow range of temperatures and pressures under which the human race existed. *We*, not they, were the freaks; for almost all the matter in the universe is at temperatures of thousands or even millions of degrees.

"Well," I said lamely, "what do we do now?"

THE Professor leaned forward eagerly. "First, we must learn a great deal more, and we must keep this an absolute secret until we are sure of the facts. Can you imagine the panic there would be if this information leaked out? Of course, the truth's inevitable sooner or later, but we may be able to break it slowly.

"You'll realize that the geological surveying side of my work is now utterly unimportant. The first thing we have to do is to build a chain of stations to find the extent of the structure. I vizualize them at ten-mile intervals towards the north, but I'd like to build the first one somewhere in South London to see how extensive the thing is. The whole job will have to be kept as secret as the building of the first radar chain in the late thirties.

"At the same time, I'm going to push up my transmitter power again. I hope to be able to beam the output much more narrowly, and so greatly increase the energy and concentration. But this will involve all sorts of mechanical difficulties, and I will need more assistance."

I promised to do my utmost to get further aid, and the Professor hopes that you will soon be able to visit his laboratory yourself. In the meantime I am attaching a photograph of the vision screen, which although not as clear as the original will, I hope, prove beyond doubt that our observations are not mistaken.

I am well aware that our grant to the Interplanetary Society has brought us dangerously near the total estimate for the year, but surely even the crossing of space is less important than the immediate investigation of this discovery which may have the most profound effects on the philosophy and the future of the whole human race."

I sat back and looked at Karn. There was much in the document I had not understood, but the main outlines were clear enough. "Yes," I said, "this is it. Where's that photograph?"

He handed it over. The quality was poor, for it had been copied many times before reaching us. But the pattern was unmistakable and I recognized it at once.

"They were good scientists," I said admiringly. "That's Callastheon, all right. So we've found the truth at last, even if it has taken us three hundred years to do it."

"Is that surprising," asked Karn, "when you consider the mountain of stuff we've had to translate and the difficulty of copying it before it evaporates?"

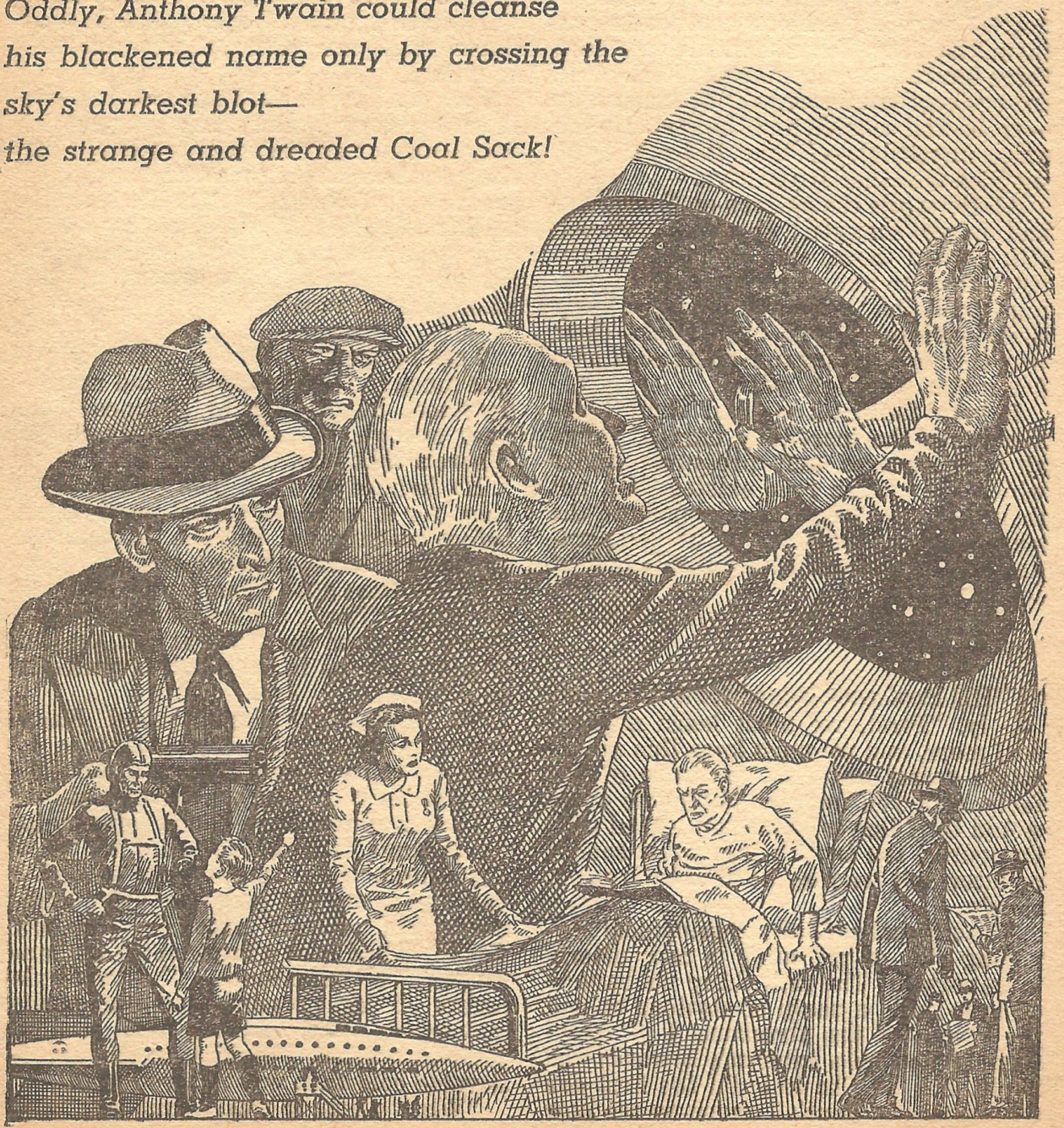
I sat in silence for a while, thinking of the strange race whose relics we were examining. Only once—never again!—had I gone up the great vent our engineers had opened into the Shadow World. It had been a frightening and unforgettable experience. The multiple layers of my pressure suit had made movement very difficult, and despite their insulation, I could sense the unbelievable cold that was all around me.

"What a pity it was," I mused, "that

(Concluded on Page 142)

beyond the black nebula

Oddly, Anthony Twain could cleanse his blackened name only by crossing the sky's darkest blot— the strange and dreaded Coal Sack!



by RENE LaFAYETTE

IN the early days of space exploration, the name of Anthony Twain was synonymous with adventure, dash and daring. For forty years—a long time even in that fast moving epoch—the face and fame of this man dazzled the people of Earth and drove them on and ever on toward new goals of accomplishment in the conquering of All.

And yet there was a time when the mention of Anthony Twain brought laughter in any gathering and ridicule in print. That was the time that our histories have forgotten about, that our folk songs never mention. But it was a time which may come to any man. Anthony Twain became old, a has-been.

Actually, he was never an explorer at all. He had been on two fortuitous trips—adventure enough in those ancient days when a ten-light-year speed was considered impossible and space vessels fell apart in collision with the meanest meteorite—and he had prospered through his writings.

He had the gift of color and drama, the flamboyance and the flare which the public in any time has adored. But he had not *done* anything.

An explorer might be great in the annals of the Explorer's Club and the files of the Extra-Terrestrial Department of Earth. But he did not become known to the public un-

A story in the series on the Conquest of Space!

til Anthony Twain had written of his exploits and glamorized him. Then and not until then was he accepted as a conquering hero. In such fashion, therefore, the name of Anthony Twain became associated with all great deeds, not from what he did, but from what he talked and wrote about.

Televisors were always happy to program him, publishers sought his favor and the public listened wide-eyed to his words. He was a name, an institution.

And then came disaster. When Anthony Twain was fifty-eight years old, one of his ghosts—and he always employed several—wrote an enthusiastic "autobiography." It had more splendor than truth, but it was good public-fodder, so thought the publisher, and he let it go. As nearly as can be determined at this infinitely long time away, Twain was ill when the manuscript was written and released. He never saw the copy until one day, in his hospital—according to a contemporary letter from a friend—he was given the finished, released product.

In that book it was claimed that Anthony Twain had done many things. He might have been forgiven if he had inferred some credit, for the sake of publicity. But one could not imagine him being so foolish as to release this material as it was. For in it he took, as his own sole achievement, the work of explorers still living.

Nothing can be more fatal to a reputation.

ANTHONY TWAIN came out of the hospital to discover himself branded a fraud and a faker. In a few brief days, a patiently constructed career went glimmering. His whole life was taken apart in the newsprints and every innermost fact of it exposed.

True, when one today reads these mouldy old accounts, they seem petty and, at best, absurd. But the public was revolting against an idol, a pastime which it has enjoyed for as long as man is old, and the public did a thorough job.

They branded him with things he had not only never said, but had never dreamed of saying. They saddled him with blame for things he had never even heard about. And they called him names which no man, no matter how far he has strayed, could deserve.

He was done, through, finished. He was discredited and abandoned. He was an object of ridicule and derision. And he was an old man, recently up from a sick bed, with all his fruitful years spent and his dearest dreams broken.

A public can be cruel. It was cruel to Anthony Twain. It almost killed him.

A lesser man would have quit, thrown up the sponge and gone away or died. But Anthony Twain had never been a lesser man. He had been known from one end of the discovered systems to the other, and he had been beloved above all men.

He set about his own rehabilitation with a dogged perseverance which would have done credit to a saint. And yet he was fifty-eight years old, broken in health, poor in pocket and without a friend left in all the world.

"I have a kind of faith," he wrote his youngest boy, "that I was not to end this way. Have faith as well, and if your friends scoff at me, don't join them and shame yourself. Help me, Jed, and *know* what I can do."

There are numerous collections of his letters, but the ones he wrote at this period are rare. They were begging and beseeching.

"If you can only understand," he wrote a senator, "how little it will take. I must do something to prove myself, to make amends. I was blinded by my own busyness. The turbulence of my life led me to believe that I was actually accomplishing something. It is not too late. Truly it is not. I shall find a project and accomplish it to the end. Only in this way can I hope to erase the littleness of my yesterdays. Please heed me. If only a grant of . . ."

But they did not heed him. He was an old man, fifty-eight. And that was old for space exploration.

For a year he lived in poverty, stripped of his fortune by suits brought about by the false claims of the "autobiography." And then an idea, a plan, came to him.

When he was a boy, he recalled standing on the spaceport at Detroit, watching the big ships swoop in, wondering where they had been, eager to ask questions of their swaggering, boastful crews. And on one of these occasions he had asked a bucko mate:

"Isn't there any place in space you wouldn't go?"

The mate had looked grandly at the round-eyed child and then had drawn a breath to say no. But his native honesty made him falter.

"I'll go anyplace," he said. "Anyplace, that is, except through the Black Nebula."

Through the years, in the dim recesses of his mind, that had stood to Anthony Twain as a symbol of the impossible. And, indeed, such seemed to be the case.

The Black Nebula was not, in truth, a nebula, but a blot across the stars. A portion of the galaxy was hidden behind it, and into that portion no one had ever gone. There was something frighteningly terrible about that blackness. It reached for countless light years in an enormous screen. It had finite limits, but these so closely bordered on the infinite that they staggered the wits. It had a shape which made it food for superstition, aside from its dark and impenetrable character.

It looked like a monster's head, rearing out of the stars.

EXPLORATION of the Nebula at the time Anthony Twain was a boy had been limited by many factors and mechanical lacks. But the ships and equipment now had long been adequate to penetrate such a veil. Yet, no one had tried, and this large block of nearby space still remained unexplored. And that was the idea that came to Anthony Twain.

"I," he said, "am going through the Black Nebula and find what lies beyond it!"

But they had even tired of laughing at him by then and not a single newspaper printed his release. The Explorer's Club was distant, if polite. The Extra-Terrestrial Department did not even answer his mail.

And for six months Anthony Twain walked the streets, often hungry, supported by his dream and denied by all he met.

Hunger is said to sharpen the wits, but for six months Twain retained all his past illusions, never realizing that he not only had to start from the bottom, he had also to make a bottom. Almost any young cadet from the Space Academy of the Navy would have had a better chance. But Twain was a long time in perceiving it.

During this period he gambled away what few dollars he still had in foolish speculations that he hoped would bring him sudden wealth. He had never failed before, and each failure now came a little harder than the last.

Ships went out on gallant expeditions. Groups were financed for the slightest goals. But no one would back Twain. First, he was too old. Second, no one believed the Black Nebula was penetrable.

He tried his hand at several kinds of promotion. He tried subscription. He tried to sell the idea to rich men to perpetuate their names. He tried to interest mineral companies in the new planets which would be gained. And he failed.

And then one night a young man came to see him—a young man with shifty eyes.

"You Twain?"

"Why, yes."

"You want to go places?"

"Certainly. I—"

"You want to run an expedition?"

"Of course. While I have no ship—"

"I'll get you a ship. Yeah. And I'll get you a crew. And mum's the word."

Twain looked more closely at his visitor. It was dark in the hall bedroom, but he could see a knife slash down the young man's cheek and a merciless gleam in his eyes.

"There'll be publicity."

"Okay. Make it publicity. But keep out how you're going and who is behind it." The young man threw a roll of bills on the table. "I'll have the ship for you, and the crew, in two weeks."

"Two weeks? That's hardly enough time to—"

"You want this job?"

"Yes."

"Then do what you're told." The young man went into the hall.

"Wait. I don't even know your name."

"Name? Well, call me—uh—Blacky. That's it. Blacky. Good night."

Anthony Twain saw very little of his benefactor. But he was engulfed in detail. He had neither time nor even real reason to doubt. He had to get a number of things. From the Extra-Terrestrial Department he had to secure permission to leave on exploration. Piracy had already taken place in space even at that very early age, and all vessels

had to be licensed. Fuel was not procurable without that precious blue ticket. He had no trouble getting that ticket. They knew him, even if they smiled and shrugged. They issued the passport to outer space.

Then he had to see the Explorer's Club. That body, risen from some dim time of terrestrial exploration, had become the most important single organization on Earth in terms of space travel. It kept all the records. It established claims. It passed on national ownership of new discoveries. It was above the United States Extra-Terrestrial Department in authority because it was above nations.

Things which no assembly of politicians could possibly have unraveled were solved easily across the desk of the Club's secretary. The discoverers of a planet were of Russian nationality. It was therefore a Russian planet. The lane was first scouted by a Norwegian: Norse permission must be secured to use it.

No one tampered with the Explorer's Club decisions. To have done so, would have been to have thrown into question the entire system of ownership then agreed upon with—who knows—perhaps even wars resulting. People were too busy making history in those days to do anything so stupid as fight. The International Geographic Society published the maps. The Explorer's Club said what went on them. Extra-Terrestrial Departments the world over restrained themselves from quarreling.

Thus, the securing of instruments and flags from the Explorer's Club was an important step in the organization of any expedition. Twain had been a member. His dues were lapsing. His credit was low, and his reputation non-existent. But the men of the Club knew these things. They let him pay up, and non-committally gave him a flag number. Though they severely restrained him from using the Club in any publicity, they otherwise gave him good cheer.

But even more important than this cheer were the instrument cases.

THESE instrument cases were twelve sealed boxes, taken from the vault of the Club, containing recording devices with which there could be no tampering. By placing these within and without the ship, the explorer might perish, might exaggerate his claims, might navigate in error or falsely identify a find—but still an exact navigational and geographic record would be made which, when examined, would establish completely the exact course and findings of the expedition.

Proudly, old Anthony Twain took them, wrapped up his flag and departed for the Bayonne Spaceport.

"Blacky" waited for him, exactly on schedule. This young man seemed to favor the shadows, and contented himself with a thumb jerk at the space vessel which was being unloaded from the oversize flatcars.

Anthony Twain took one look at it and almost balked.

This space ship had been old when Twain's father had been young. It was dented and rusted and scraped. It was scorched by fire and beaten by ancient atmospheres. If it flew at all, it would be a greater miracle than the first flight of man.

Twain went up to the door and peered in. The craneman waved him away while the vessel was being placed in the guides for launching. A spaceport official came up and asked for the clearance chit which would account for the fuel already taken on.

Nervously, the old man again approached the vessel. He opened the port and stepped within. He felt the muzzle of a gun—cold against his back.

"Just sit down, Pop," a voice said. "What's time to you?"

Twain found he had five companions. They were nervous, slit-eyed young men, not a space ranger in the lot of them.

"Handle those boxes carefully," said Twain.

"Where do they go?" said one young man busy pulling them in.

"I read about it," said Blacky in the ship's port. "Bring them out here and fasten them into the slots in the hull. People will get suspicious if we don't."

Unwillingly, two of the young men showed themselves outside. There was a scrape of bolts. Twain looked around him at the ship's interior. It had been finished fairly well. At least he saw that the necessaries, such as oxygen and food, were there and that some attention at least had been paid to equipment. Then his eyes settled on the bulkhead. An astonishing number of weapons were slotted there.

"Okay, Pop," said Blacky. "You know how to fly this thing?"

"I think I can manage," said Twain ironically.

"Good. See this chart? There's the place, there by the cross. That's where we land. Okay?"

Twain saw that Geodar of the Procyon System had been indicated. It was a new discovery, mainly unexplored, near a frequented space lane.

"If you think I will lend my name to piracy—" he began.

"Grow up, Pop," Blacky interrupted. "Do we look like space pirates? Yes? Well, we're not. Five hours ago I was supposed to have burned in the hot seat at Chicago. My friends have similar reasons. What you do is up to you, but we ain't above trying to fly this thing ourselves."

Twain looked at the gun one of the young men still held on him. He thought of the folly of backing down. He'd be dead, and his purpose gone. What could he lose now? He brightened a little. He was the man of glamor and adventure. He'd asked for this. Well, he'd take his chance.

When he went up to the control room and began to check the instruments they were suspicious and alert. But when he settled himself in the hydraulic chair, they relaxed.

"Okay, Pop," said Blacky. "You're all right. What do we do?"

"Lie down on the bunks and buckle your straps. The structure will do the rest. Who got this for you? This ship, I mean."

"This? Why it's the *Trailblazer I*. A junkman coughed it up on demand."

ANTHONY TWAIN smiled. The old *Trailblazer I*, the first ship to reach Ursus Minor's key, the Pole Star. Well, she'd seen better days. Like himself, she had a forgotten chain of glories. And she'd come from a junkman. They made a pair, didn't they? A pair of has-beens.

He pushed the triggers and they were on their way. It was a sluggish start, for the *Trailblazer I* was no modern, snorting demon. She was more like a plodding draft horse. Taking the atmosphere slowly she required half an hour to reach space.

He handled her carefully as she approached the speed of light. He was not sure how well she would stand up, going through that wall. And, more important, he had not plotted the course he intended to follow. The Black Nebula was in an entirely different direction from Geodar.

He turned, not toward the right and his ordered destination, but to the left and toward his goal.

Twain did it cleverly. By bucking forward with new accelerations, he kept his "crew" in the bunks. He eased up only when he heard a man start yelling, and he increased speed again whenever he heard a man stir. He balanced it to achieve at once the maximum performance out of the old *Trailblazer* and the minimum of interference by his crew.

At first he could see his goal through the telesight, a blotch against the far brightness of the galaxy. But then, as he broke through the wall of light, his destination grew much less distinct. As he came up to four light speeds, he steadied his directional stabilizers, checked once more, and then let the *Trailblazer* full out to the maximum acceleration permitted by her interior gravity fields.

He was stiff and cold at the controls. He had forgotten how long he had been there. He had to pull his fingers from the fuel triggers with his left hand and straighten out the joints by force. He was too old for this sort of thing, he knew. Four young pilots would have shifted with one another for this much of a flight's beginning even in a modern ship.

Now that they could walk, Blacky and two men came forward, awed, to the control room. Back through the door, Twain could see a fourth man busy in the galley compartment abaft the salon. The remaining two could be seen through the series of open doors, gazing numbly at the motors and tanks and maze of mechanism in the tail.

"How we going?" asked Blacky.

"One of you will have to stand by here," said Twain. "There's nothing much to do. All that's required is to sit here before the panels and watch for red to show up anywhere. We're not likely to blunder into a dead system, but if we do, this panel will tell of it a minute or two before we actually enter. Just watch and yell if you see anything. I'll come up and take the avoidance action."

"Sounds simple," said Blacky, cockily. He seated himself with importance in the big hydraulic chair and reached out for the triggers.

"Don't touch that," said Twain. "One notch on that would throw us all flat. We don't want any broken necks. The ship's gravity field is adjusted carefully to our acceleration. We are flying on automatic stabilizers. Touch something and we're liable to die, the lot of us."

Blacky the fearless put his hands hastily in his lap and drew in his feet. Then he scowled at his men.

"You hear that, you guys? Conduct yourselves accordin'! Now, Pop, how do we look at the destination?"

The *Trailblazer* had been used a long time and many modern devices had wandered aboard her, installed in unhandy places, but there nevertheless. Among these was an upper-spectrum rationalizer which would take light waves, received several times above 186,000 miles per second, and tune them down so that they would translate to sight as though a ship were motionless. The tuning knob was near the triggers, and the eyepiece was four inches above Blacky's head.

"We're going too fast," said Twain. "You rush at something red and it turns blue. Like a locomotive whistle rises when it comes at you. Understand that?"

"By golly it does," said Blacky.

"Light is like the whistle. It rises in wave length as its source approaches you, or you approach the source. We're doing about four or four and a half light speeds now. That's around eight hundred thousand miles a second."

The two young men whistled in amazement. "Good golly, Pop," Blacky said. "They'd have a hard time catching us now, wouldn't they?"

"I believe they would. They couldn't even find us out here. Theoretically, we are several times the size of the universe just now, but—"

"We are! Well, I always knew I'd amount to something," said Blacky. "Tell me more."

"But we're actually so tiny that not even the most powerful telescope on a planet would sight us if we passed within a thousand miles of it. Space is crammed with pieces of debris bigger than we are."

"Won't we hit any of it?" asked one of the young men, his face pale.

"We are in the safe speed bracket for our collision defenses," said Twain. "A force field around us prevents a direct contact with solid objects. It reaches several hundred miles in advance of us and parts the way like a ship's prow parts water. We are moving so fast and our inertia is so great, that the relative energy would thrust even a large asteroid aside. We're safe—unless you monkey with those dials."

HE went aft, to be soberly regarded by the cook and the other two young men. He sank down on the vacant bunk and pulled off his street shoes. From his bag he pulled a pair of space boots, feather light and warm, and put them on his grateful feet. Then he plastered his face with dry wash-shave cream and removed his whiskers. All these operations were regarded with a suspicious interest by the men. But when he lit a cigarette, eyebrows lifted eagerly.

"Can we smoke?" asked Hammerhead, the cook.

"Air-cleaner will take care of it," said Twain.

Their hands shook as they lit up, and smiles of contentment came over their faces. Hammerhead rose suddenly and thrust a mug of steaming coffee into Anthony Twain's hand. One of the other men fished behind a pillow and came up with a bottle which he uncorked. After a glance at Twain he poured two ounces into the coffee.

"This is luxury," said Twain. "I haven't been out this far for many years. Not, in fact, since I was a boy. We didn't have much hot, then. We needed all our heat for fuel—and even then, five light years was supposed to be impossible. We dodged meteorites like stunt pilots and we sometimes got where we started to go. It's different now. Why, this old ship is a luxury liner compared to the first I sailed off Earth in. And even this one is old. They've brought her up to date, though. I—"

"What you mean, you sometimes got where you started to go?" asked Hammerhead.

"We sometimes missed destination," said Twain. "It's easy to do. Planets are smaller stuff than stars, and stars are often overshot even today. Once you get going, you sometimes can't tell—"

He had finished his coffee. Hammerhead yanked the cup away, hostile. "Listen, Mr. Twain. You better not miss Geodar. If you do, well—"

The other two men were tense, suspicious again. Twain looked coolly at Hammerhead, ground out the cigarette and lay back in the bunk. Through the overhead port, despite the uneasy "hunt-roll" of the stabilizers, a constellation burned clear. It was Orion and below it was Procyon. These men had only to glance upwards through that big, leaded pane and they would see their destination—at right angles to their present course.

Twain sighed and, presently, slept.

In the weeks that followed, two things happened. Twain found that, old or not, he could take it. And the *Trailblazer I*, newly rescued from the junk pile, proved that her original engineers and her refitters had had the explorer's safety at heart.

They cracked the first hundred light speeds and went on accelerating. And the ship and the field and the drives all held. They began their third month and Anthony Twain, up and down a dozen times in any sleeping period, checking engines, motors and drives, checking speed, correcting course, avoiding masses of dust and navigating, was still in excellent health.

Blacky tried to learn all he could about space flight, and became hopelessly mired in several handbooks Twain provided. One of the other men, Pete Defoe, slogged along at navigation on the strength of a high school education and Twain was content to let him flounder, for a sudden check to this enthusiasm would have created suspicion.

For some days, Twain had had no chance to inspect his goal. There had been a minor breakdown in the port air turbine and his ingenuity and strength had been taxed with it and, now, when he turned his calculations to the Black Nebula, he was stunned to find that they were almost upon it. He hastily trained the telesight and adjusted the wavelength.

He scowled. There should be something more than stars before him. And yet there were only stars, the usual inextricably complex masses of them! He realized they must be off course, and he whirled angrily to find Blacky looking at him.

"Have you messed with these controls?" demanded Twain.

Blacky's smile was unreadable. "What's the matter, Pop? Got yourself lost? What's the gadget you're using?"

Twain snapped it off. He stared perplexedly at his instruments. If the ship's course had been altered, he would not be able to read it here, for in those days only an actual sight on known stars would determine position, and a ship's instruments read relative to herself.

Blacky shoved Twain out of the way. He touched the exact button Twain had just turned. He looked ahead interestedly.

"Hidin' somethin', weren't you, Pop?" He was suddenly vicious. "What else are you hiding?"

WITH a twist and a throw, Blacky threw the old man against the control panels and Twain, seeking to right himself, was grabbed again and struck hard and fast across the face.

"What else you hidin'?"

Blacky surged ahead to grab Twain. Suddenly, the ship gave a roll, and her gravity went out of adjustment. She shuddered as though she had been kicked, and both men were hurled against the far bulkhead and held there. She was turning. Turning because Blacky, in his anger, had batted against her guides and triggers and had thrown the entire board out of adjustment.

"Let me go!" yelled Twain. "Confound you! In ten seconds we won't be able to get our course! We have no check points! The gyros will spin to this new level! Let me go!"

Blacky let him go, but that was all that Blacky could do. And all that Twain could do. For so great was the centrifugal force, they were held tight as rivets against the skin of the ship.

For two hours they were pressed there, losing strength, struggling to get forward to the controls.

Out of this insanity, some sanity was born. Blacky could not be of any help even if he reached the triggers, for there was nothing he could do about it. Twain was not as strong, but he knew what there was to know about handling the ship. Blacky at long length, half flattened and the fight gone from him, looked at Twain.

"I'm going to put you up there, old man. Try to stand toward the panel."

With Blacky's help, Twain was at last kneeling against the force. The blood was unwilling to stay in his head, and his vision was alternately red and black, but he straightened. He steadied out an arm and he reached the nul switch.

The panel went white. The gravity adjusted. The power went off. They were tumbling through space on an unknown course past a host of unknown stars. But they could walk.

Pete Defoe was in agony in the galley. He had been passing through, and had broken his leg. Hammerhead was ruefully examining two broken blood vessels in his leg. One man in the salon was dead from a stroke.

Twain knelt beside Defoe. He straightened out the injured limb and discovered the fracture was a simple one. They gave Pete a drink of whisky and Twain set the leg and put it in splints.

At length when the man was easy, Twain asked him: "Did you touch anything in the control room?"

Defoe looked confused, saw Blacky and looked scared. "I—I picked up a couple things. I—I adjusted a couple knobs on the stabilizers. They seemed to need it and you were asleep. I'd been reading in the book you gave me how they worked—"

"Leave them alone!" snapped Twain.

Blacky put his gun away reluctantly.

"I'm captain of this ship," Twain said, looking at the hard faces of the remaining men. "She is in trouble. She was traveling at a decelerating speed of around fifteen light speeds and there can be an error in her course now wide enough to miss an entire constellation. I have no way of checking her position. Folly has already wrecked your lives. If you do not accept my command, you may now leave those same lives in space, drifting forever toward some unknown galaxy on the rim of the universe. Do you understand? All of you?"

They did. They were frightened.

"Put Defoe in his bunk and lay out the dead man. I will be back presently." Twain walked to the door and stopped. "There's another command you'll obey if you're to get out of this alive. Give me your guns."

Blacky's eyes shuttled as if he were looking for some way to escape. Twain put out his hand. Blacky backed up.

"It's illegal for a crew to possess guns in space," Twain said. "There's a thing called space madness. You have it, Blacky. You almost killed all of us. For the safety of this vessel, I demand your weapon."

The other four looked intently at their leader.

"Did you cause this commotion?" Hammerhead asked him slowly.

Blacky looked confused.

"Give him your gun," said Hammerhead to his ex-leader.

LATER that watch, Anthony Twain was bitterly aware of the cost of his victory. He had all the weapons of these people, but he wasn't accomplishing what he had set out to do. He tried again and again, until his head felt like bursting, to make sense out of his position. But it had been altered violently. He re-questioned Defoe about the knobs turned, but Defoe was too conscience-stricken to be coherent. Just when the knob-turning was done was also a mystery, for time blends into time in space and there were no handy measures like lightness and darkness.

Where they had strayed, how far, Twain did not know. Play the telesight over the stars as he might, he could not find the Black Nebula. He at last concluded that the error of their course was so large that that ominous body stood edgewise to them.

The sky was peopled with billions of strange stars, and space was impenetrably black. He did not even have a relative position from which to photograph whatever might lie behind his goal if he had skirted the edge.

It was on the tenth watch from that time that Anthony Twain displayed his genius. They had been braking down steadily, for there was no use going on now when, without the use of the telesight it was possible to examine stars.

With the most powerful electron binoculars aboard he raked all the heavens. He again failed to locate the Nebula. But he found the galactic hub. Making minute calculations then, using all observed data aboard, he placed the position of Earth. Then he placed his own position relative to the hub and thence to Earth. Later he was to do a masterly treatise which would lead to the reformation of all space navigation.

But just now he was saving his life. Eventually he would discover the galactic magnetic field and provide a means of using it, but just now he was interested in getting one small ship home.

He set up his new course by using a crude pelorus made of a protractor and a piece of string, and he stabilized on it first in one plane, then in a second and finally in a third.

"I am returning," he told his crew as they sat around the board at supper. "It is not safe to continue outward bound. But wait. When I am within sighting distance of Earth I shall reorient our position and show you your new destination. I warn you that similar accidents may prevent you from ever reaching it. So if you wish to land again on Earth, I will put you down in any country you elect. And, afterwards, if any of my former influence returns—which I must assure you is doubtful—I will obtain pardons for you."

They had "buried" the dead man the "day" before. Fresh in their minds was his lonely fate, exploded outward and drifting forever in absolute zero.

"Cap," said Hammerhead, "I don't know what these pistol-happy gents want, but I'll take India. I know a guy that teamed up with a Rajah and went straight and did good. We'd all go straight if the cops wasn't on our tails. I got enough space. Besides, we ain't got enough food to last till we get home, much less for another dizzy jump."

But Blacky had another idea. He had been cutting canned meat while Twain and Hammerhead spoke. Now he carelessly started to pick his front teeth with his knife. Suddenly he threw it at Twain.

The old man went backwards, steel in his chest. Blacky came across the table like a panther, knocking dishes aside. Twain hit the deck, still in his chair and rolled. Blacky missed him in that first rush. And then Twain's heels caught him in the throat.

Blacky choked and clawed at Twain's ankles, swearing in a high, terrible whine. Twain wrested out the knife. He lunged up and struck. He struck three times. And Blacky lay still.

Twain stood there, red running from the blade, a dark stain blotting his own shirt.

"Is it Earth?" he asked the rest.

"Earth," they said.

But it was an empty victory, being permitted to return. It would have been a marvelous thing if his reputation was not now completely ruined. But now he would come back with a story of bungling, and that would be the end.

HE was very quiet on the return. He answered the men in monosyllables, and looked vacantly out the ports. It was no cheer to him when Orion came in sight once more as a constellation instead of a jumble of stars. It was a sad thing for him to see Earth at last below and settle to his first landing in the Himalayas where he lost his crew.

He braced up when he shook their hands.

"Remember," said Hammerhead, "if you get the drag, Cap, spring a pardon for us and we'll be home. And you won't never lack for no good cars neither, let me tell yuh. We'll steal you the best, won't we, boys?"

He went away from there, rising up high enough to see North America, and dropped down once more. He landed without event or fanfare at the Bayonne Spaceport, just five months and twenty-seven days from the moment of his departure.

He took a subway into Manhattan, changed at Grand Central and eventually found himself before the doors of the Explorer's Club. He felt very old, very gray, shabby and forgotten.

He gave the attendant the flag, identified himself, and then went quickly away. He did not want to see anybody or talk to anybody. He was a has-been in earnest now. He had had a chance, and he'd failed at it. The best thing for him to do was forget any part of his yesterdays.

There was a cold wind whipping leaves on the dead grass of Central Park. He turned his collar up against it and walked across town. He found his old landlady with a hall bedroom for rent. She was suspicious of him until he showed her some of the money he still retained. And then he closed the door on her and threw himself across the bed.

He had been dreaming of a good sleep for weeks and weeks. And yet, sleep did not come to him for hours. He was living again his old life, thinking again of his days on the televisors, talking

again with his friends—

It was very cold in the room when he awoke. It was evening, and he did not know of what day. But did it matter what day? Did it matter?

He fumbled in his grip for a bar of chocolate, and then gave it up. His eye fixed on the gas radiator, and suddenly he stood up. He reached for the handle.

The loud knock stopped him. There seemed to be trouble in the hall. Wonderingly he threw open the door. At first he did not recognize Clyde Melbourne of the Explorer's Club.

"Anthony! By golly, man, it's luck to find you! We thought you'd gone to some swank hotel, but Billy here said you were a creature of habit and instinct. You remember Billy of the *Evening Press?*" There was a surge behind him, and he blocked it. "Hold it, boys! One at a time!"

"Wait a minute!" said Twain. "There's something wrong! I—"

"All right, all right!" said Melbourne, impatiently holding off three cameramen who were snapping over his head and under his arms and blinding everyone. "All right! You'll have him soon enough. Now 'Tony, I want you to come down and verify—"

"Just a moment," said Twain, standing very erect. "I did not find what I went for. Through an error—"

"Stop shoving!" cried Melbourne to the crowd massed in the hall. " 'Tony, I guess the whole pack of them is anxious to apologize. We've done you an awful scurvy trick. I'd give half a dozen trophies if I'd backed you up on your idea— Stop it out there!"

"Bring him out here!" yelled a reporter.

"We want Twain!" they began to chant.

"After all," wheezed somebody, "I'm his publisher. I want—"

"We want Twain!"

"Please tell me," begged Twain. "What has happened?"

"Why, you did it! You did it, man! You did it! Discovered the Black Nebula! This afternoon, we went out and got our recorders and instruments and there she was, camera shots and all. Navigation perfect! Samples! The dust! Everything! You went right into the heart of it!"

"I—I what?" cried Twain.

"You made it!" said Melbourne. "But you knew that. I know you're tired, but—"

"Tell me," said Twain excitedly. "What is it exactly?"

"A polarized curtain! It's no barrier to anything but light! It's a shadow, nothing more! A shadow in the sky. But come on, Twain, you know that. Heck, man, you went through it! Clean through it! And you know as well as I do. No use to beg off just to get some sleep. There's a banquet waiting! They want you at ten o'clock at the televisor at UBC. And these hounds out here have bid up the price they'll pay for your exclusive story to astronomical figures. Come on! I'll lend you clothes. You're wanted in nineteen places at once. The whole planet and every populated area in the Universe is waiting to hear from you!"

" 'Tony!" said somebody. "Your boys are here. Come on out for a picture."

"Pictures can wait!" said Melbourne. "Make way! Make way for Captain Twain!"

Anthony Twain looked at the milling, eager faces and the outstretched hands. His spine straightened up, his head came back. He smiled a quiet smile. He was not hearing what they were yelling at him. Over and over in his mind ran a phrase, a single phrase:

A shadow in the sky.

A CLASSIC OF SCIENTIFICTION!

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THE ULTIMATE CATALYST

by

JOHN TAINE

•

NEXT ISSUE'S HALL OF FAME NOVELET!

The Road to Space Travel

MEDICINE AND SPACE TRAVEL

When Man hits the starways, his body will be subjected to a variety of new strains!

MOST people interested in railroads know that one of the earliest locomotives was named *Rocket*. Some also know that the term "rocketing to fame" may have been derived from the name of that locomotive. But few know why the locomotive was called *Rocket* in the first place.

Those who are familiar with the military history of the period in which the *Rocket* was built will think of the world-wide fame of General Sir William Congreve's war rockets. These war rockets, carrying incendiary warheads, had become quite proverbial a little over a century ago.

They had set Boulogne afire, reduced Copenhagen to a large heap of smolder-

One of a Series by WILLY LEY

ing ashes, forced the great port of Danzig to surrender by way of firing the grain storage magazines. They had contributed to Napoleon's spectacular defeat at Leipzig and the capture of Washington, D.C., by the British in 1814.

But the naming of the locomotive *Rocket* was not a direct allusion to Congreve's early missiles. Railroads were a great novelty in those days and much discussion was devoted to the problem of the speed with which they could safely travel. George Stephenson, its designer, said on one occasion that double the speed of the horse-drawn mail coach seemed reasonable to him.

Whereupon a critic, writing for a now defunct British engineering journal, exploded with, "What could be sillier and more ridiculous than the promise to build a locomotive with twice the speed of a mail coach! One might as well expect the inhabitants of Woolwich to ride a Congreve war rocket as to trust their lives to such an engine." Whereupon Congreve called his locomotive *Rocket,* won a race over a mail coach and "rocketed to fame."

Medical Margin

The point which that critic wanted to make was not that a locomotive with twice the speed of a mail coach was impossible. He might have been willing to grant the possibility of building it. What he disputed was the safety—medical, not engineering safety. For a while he was even taken seriously.

In Bavaria two deputies of parliament introduced a bill requiring high wooden fences along all railroad tracks, so that the travelers would not be shocked by the speeding landscape and the onlookers retain their sanity by being spared the sight of the speeding train. The speed in question, it may be mentioned, was on the order of 18 miles per hour.

What makes the whole performance the more incredible is the fact that a speed of twice that of a mail coach was reached every day even then. A good rider on a good horse did it without worrying about such problems as whether he would be able to breathe while traveling that fast or whether his mad dash would drive spectators insane.

Today, only a little more than a century after those amazing discussions, we have reached the point where men are actually riding large war rockets or refined facsimiles thereof. But the XS-1 is not yet a spaceship. Where future spaceships are concerned the doubts you hear expressed nowadays again concern the health and well-being of the pilot rather than the engineering problem of the ship itself.

Importance of Health

Admittedly the health and survival of the pilot does deserve some thought. Designing spaceships would be an exceptionally useless occupation if we could not be reasonably sure that the pilot will be alive and well after the trip.

The most direct approach, I think, is to consider a specific trip and see whether the average human body is capable of meeting the requirements. The example of a trip to the moon suggests itself, partly because its theory has been worked out in considerable detail and partly because actual space travel will begin with a moontrip.

The moontrip will begin with eight minutes of high acceleration, followed by four 24-hour days of zero acceleration, followed by about two minutes of deceleration for landing. Mathematically as well as physiologically there is no difference between acceleration and deceleration, so that the latter may be disregarded.

It is merely a repetition of the start of the trip over a much shorter interval. I think it can be taken for granted that a man who withstood a given high acceleration for eight minutes could stand it for two minutes.

Under 3 G's

When at rest and near sea level the human body is under a steady strain of one gravity of acceleration. We are born under 1-g, we grow up with it, eat, drink and sleep with it and when we finally die it is still under 1-g.

But if we strapped an accelerometer to a man we would see that it does not draw a continuous straight line. During a ride on horseback, for example, the meter would jump to 2½-g's and even to 3-g's at regular intervals, with points in between where the needle would try to go below zero.

During a leisurely ride on a springless oxcart over a country road the needle might even jump to 6-g's on bad bumps. And when the wearer of the accelerometer jumps into a lake for a swim the

needle will drop down to virtually zero for as long as a few seconds.

The question therefore was not whether the human body would stand deviations from the customary and theoretical 1-g but whether it could stand them for any length of time. The first experiment made especially for the purpose of determining the resistance to acceleration was performed by the German Rocket Society in 1928 by means of a then brand-new electrically driven carrousel which could safely be speeded up.

The man subjected to the test was a professional circus acrobat by the name of Wittkuhn. The test was conducted by the society's first president Johannes Winkler. The theoretical reasoning was that a spaceship ascending vertically would reach escape velocity in eight minutes if accelerating with 3-g's, which would subject the pilot to a total of 4-g's.

Hence the speed was chosen to produce a centrifugal force equal to 4-g's linear acceleration. The time was ten minutes for good measure.

"Cognac!"

While the device was spinning Winkler stood by, holding an enormous pocket watch in his hand and looking dignified in his black suit. The carrousel slowed to a stop.

Wittkuhn got up from the bench, conscious, unharmed, but enormously dizzy from having been spun around for ten minutes. He staggered out and said something which disappointed Winkler enormously. He said just one word—"Cognac!"

Since then special devices have been built for the purpose of testing the resistance of pilots to acceleration, of establishing individual limits and, incidentally, for the testing of special suits designed to assist the pilot's natural resistance. Because of all this we are sure now that the accelerations encountered during a spaceship take-off will not harm any normally healthy individual.

In fact the vast majority of healthy young men would not even "black out"—although in actual operation this would be rather unimportant, since the stabilizing and steering of the ship would be done by gyroscopic devices. The fuel cut-off at the proper moment would be activated not by the pilot but by an integrating accelerometer of which several types have been developed.

The Bigger Problem

Because of this research work the bigger problem now is the period which follows the period of acceleration. As soon as the rocket motors have been shut off acceleration will drop to zero and although the ship will still be deep in the earth's gravitational field the customary effects of gravity will disappear. And this condition will last until the motors resume work.

It is a bigger problem partly because of its longer duration—it will be the normal state of affairs during voyages through space—and partly because there is no way on which we can test physiological reactions experimentally without actually going off into space.

Zero acceleration cannot be produced here on the ground for any length of time. The closest we have is a jump from a high diving board but even there zero is not quite attained because of air resistance.

Professor Hermann Oberth, the father of European rocket research, having studied medicine originally, once devised an experiment which was supposed at least to produce the sensations of zero acceleration.

It consisted of imbibing a carefully measured quantity of alcohol, an even more carefully determined dosage of scopolamine, then immersion of the body in water of body temperature. It involved also closing the eyes to eliminate points of reference and spinning the body in the water to numb the sense of balance. But when asked to describe his sensations Professor Oberth never got beyond the statement that it was "not unpleasant."

I received the impression that this combination of drugs and manipulations to lull the various senses had produced a kind of nirvana in which there were no sensations left at all. Obviously this is not a good replica of what is to be expected. Simply floating under water might come much closer to the actual sensations.

Functional Problem

But the sensations to be experienced are comparatively unimportant. They could be overcome in one way or another if necessary—not that I think for even a moment that it will be necessary. The

question is how our organs are going to behave under zero acceleration. Will heart, lungs, stomach, kidneys and intestines perform as usual or will they be stopped by the complete lack of gravitational effects?

It may seem strange at first glance, but apparently there is only one organ in the human body which depends on gravitational effects for its functioning. That organ is the system of liquid-filled tubes in the inner ear which constitutes the organ of balance.

All others are strangely independent of gravity. We may have to thank a number of very remote fishlike ancestors for this fact, for it would be dangerous for a floating animal if its organs depended on gravitational pull in a specific direction.

Our lungs, for example, depend on a certain amount of air pressure for their functioning but not on gravity. Nor does eating and drinking have anything to do with gravity. The Romans ate lying down habitually and one can even learn to eat upside down, swallowing against gravity.

Expulsion of waste matter is entirely governed by pressure differences and muscular contractions. The heart does pump against gravity when it gets blood from the large veins in the legs but the major part of its work is in overcoming the friction of the blood against the walls of the blood vessels.

That dizzy feeling you get when hanging upside down is caused by gravity, since the blood vessels in the upper part of the body are not accustomed to neutralizing the weight of the blood. However, they "learn" fast if you insist on doing it. In short, all the major bodily functions should go on under zero acceleration just as they do under the customary 1-g.

Balance Gone Haywire

The sense of balance is very likely to go haywire but that sense is most of the time augmented by the sense of vision anyway. It would be replaced by it almost automatically so that the difference might be just barely perceptible as long as the eyes are open. Most likely the adjustments which the sense organs cannot make will be made in the brain.

Having examined the two major and "normal" conditions to which a space pilot would have to adjust it remains to look around for less usual conditions which could become dangerous. For a while there was an enormous amount of talk about cosmic radiation and all the horrible things it would do.

We now know that concentrated doses of cosmic radiation would be pretty bad but we are also sure that such concentrated doses simply don't exist. To the experts this was known some time ago.

In 1929 Dr. Kolhörster, who was then considered the outstanding expert on cosmic rays in Europe, assured me that the amount of such rays to be encountered would be harmless biologically speaking. It is interesting that Dr. Kolhörster also gave warning against trying to carry armor heavy enough to absorb them, since that would produce secondary radiation which might cause harm.

Meteorite Peril

Of course a spaceship would be subjected to irradiation from the sun in a form which we, protected by a few hundred miles of atmosphere, would find hard to believe. But these radiations are all of a kind which is stoppable by a quarter inch of metal even more effectively than by two hundred miles of atmosphere.

In that respect the windows are a danger point but it is a kind of danger about which the designer can do something. What has to be done and what can be done are known to specialists even now.

Nothing however can be done about meteorites, which means that nobody knows at this moment of a device which will protect the ship against these space flyers. There are many things that can be done after a ship has been hit.

Unfortunately it is almost impossible to form a good estimate as to the probability of being struck. Some Astronomical experts have gone on record as saying that even in the densest sections of a meteorite *swarm* (leftovers of a dead comet) there is only half an ounce of matter in 500,000,000,000—yes, five hundred thousand millions—cubic feet of space. The minimum distance between particles in such a swarm was estimated to be on the order of seventy miles.

But other astronomers have estimated that several million meteorites, most of them tiny, strike the earth every 24 hours. Some with more enthusiastic inclinations have upped that figure to a

billion meteorites per 24 hours.

Even if one takes into account the fact that the earth is an eight thousand mile target with a very considerable gravitational field—while the ship would be an eighty foot target with a gravitational field indetectable two miles awav —these two sets of figures do not go together very well. Unless, as I suspect, the billion-meteorites-per-day people count single ionized gas molecules as "meteorites."

Armor May Be Enough

Both sides agree however that a meteorite which you could hold on your palm and feel is a rather rare event. And certain experiences with the depth of penetration achieved by high-velocity bullets encourage the belief that a small meteorite, the size of a grain of birdseed, would not penetrate steel plate even with enormously high impact velocities.

It is quite possible that their kinetic energy would be immediately transformed into heat which vaporizes them, causing not a hole but a small shallow crater in the metal. If that is true meteorites which can and will penetrate might be even more rare than the figures of seventy-mile-distance in a dense swarm indicate.

To fight them one simple step would be to line the walls of the cabin with sponge rubber of the sort made resilient by air bubbles. Such sponge rubber would provide a self-sealing protection because the air pressure in each "bubble" would be that of sea level and the sponge rubber would expand in the direction of lesser pressure.

The air pressure in the cabin as a whole would also force the adjoining edges of the sponge rubber lining into the hole in the metal wall. But if the hole caused by the meteorite is reasonably large, say half an inch or more, it would not be automatically eliminated by such self-sealing action but would have to be patched by the pilot.

Space-Patching

With this we enter the medical field again. If the designer of the cabin had not taken a few precautions, it would be odds-on that the pilot would never be able to patch a hole. Not that he would "burst like a deep-sea fish brought to the surface" as you may have read in some stories. The pilot would stay in one piece.

The maximum pressure difference his body would have to stand would be merely the difference between sea-level pressure and zero pressure—some 14 lbs. per square inch—also known as "one atmosphere." The deep sea fish bursts open because in that case the difference can be a thousand atmospheres, slightly more than in the case of the deep-air animal *Homo sapiens.*

But while he stays in one piece there would be internal damage caused by diver's sickness, the bends. This sickness, dangerous and very unpleasant as it is under any circumstances, would be especially deadly in the case of a spaceship pilot because it would render him incapable of taking simple action.

The cause of the bends was a mystery for centuries until what actually goes on in the body was learned. It is caused by the fact that the inert nitrogen gas which we inhale along with the oxygen is soluble in the body fluids, especially the blood.

When the external pressure drops the nitrogen gas comes out of solution and forms millions upon millions of tiny bubbles in the bloodstream. That's what causes the damage.

How to Avoid the Bends

There is now a way around this difficulty, already in use in diving in special cases. It consists of changing the atmosphere which the diver breathes. Instead of surrounding him with the usual atmosphere of about 1/5th of oxygen to 4/5th of nitrogen, the nitrogen is replaced by helium.

Helium is just as inert chemically—(more so, in fact)—and while it also dissolves in the bloodstream it does so in much smaller amounts. The result is that a rapid ascent from the sea bottom which would cause a fatal attack of the bends with nitrogen, causes a hardly noticeable attack of the same sickness if helium has been substituted.

The lesson to be drawn from these experiments is simple—but one may ask why designers want to go to the trouble of taking care of the whole cabin. Why not just put the pilot in a space-suit?

He would be a much smaller target than the ship. If he were hit directly no further discussion would be necessary

under any circumstances. And while a space suit might be a bore and a nuisance when it comes to long trips it could probably be worn for the duration of a moon expedition.

Cabin Cruiser

The answer to this argument is that it is much easier to design a fine cabin than it is to design a workable space suit, not to mention a comfortable one. An adaptation of the ordinary diving suit won't do because the diving suit is based on strong external pressure which is fought off by increasing the internal pressure of the suit to about the same level.

When conditions are reversed things are anything but simple. With lower external pressure the suit will "starfish" as L. Sprague de Camp called it. It will spread its limbs and the limbs of the pilot along with them. Perhaps somebody will find a very simple method of overcoming this one day—but until then we can imagine a space suit only as a shell which fully encloses the body of the pilot.

His own arms would not reach into the arms of the suit at all. The latter would be purely mechanical like those used in the laboratories of nuclear physicists, manipulated from the inside. A thing like that could be designed but don't ask me how it would feel to be inside one for five days.

Possibly the answer—to be used only as a precaution at first until the true extent of the meteorite danger is known—would be a rather large and very light plastic globe enclosing the head only, admitting cabin air through valves but sealing itself at once if the cabin pressure drops off, holding enough air for a minute's activity.

Most of these questions, however, are minor issues. They are things about which the designer can do something if and when it becomes necessary. The main medical problems are the responses of the body against acceleration, from zero to four-g's or above. And to the best of our present-day knowledge the human body can cope with such acceleration.

Space travel is possible not only for the ship but also for the pilot inside.

THE FIRES WITHIN

(Concluded from Page 125)

our emergence destroyed them so completely. They were a clever race, and we might have learned a lot from them."

"I don't think we can be blamed," said Karn. "We never really believed that anything could exist under those awful conditions of near vacuum and almost absolute zero. It couldn't be helped."

I did not agree. "I think it proves that they were the more intelligent race. After all, *they* discovered us first. Everyone laughed at my grandfather when he said that the radiation he'd detected from the Shadow World must be artificial."

Karn ran one of his tentacles over the manuscript.

"We've certainly discovered the cause of that radiation," he said. "Notice the date—it's just a year before your grandfather's discovery. The Professor must have got his grant all right!" He laughed unpleasantly. "It must have given him a shock when he saw us coming up to the surface, right underneath him."

I scarcely heard his words, for a most uncomfortable feeling had suddenly come over me. I thought of the thousands of miles of rock lying below the great city of Callestheon, growing hotter and denser all the way to the Earth's unknown core.

And so I turned to Karn.

"That isn't very funny," I said quietly. "It may be our turn next."

●

A trio of humans descends to smallness, but finds that strength is not always a matter of size in FURY FROM LILLIPUT, an amazing novel by Murray Leinster featured in the gala August issue of our companion magazine THRILLING WONDER STORIES— now on sale, 25c everywhere!

THE ETHER VIBRATES

(Continued from page 7)

glimpse of his first few paragraphs. We hope they prove as tantalizing to you as they did to us.

Dick Blair dug up a Fifth Dynasty tomb in Lower Egypt and found that one object, and one only, had been spoiled by dampness in a climate which preserved all the other objects in the tomb to perfection. Almost simultaneously, in New York, a plumber carrying a kit of tools turned into a doorway on Eighth Avenue and was never seen again, living or dead.

Shortly after, a half-ton of dried figs vanished explicably from a locked warehouse in Smyrna and—in New York—a covered barge complete with a load bricks and building materials evaporated into thin air while a night-watchman gazed goggle-eyed at the phenomenon. His account of the event was not believed.

Baffling? You're darned right it is. But these and other strange events are all linked to THE OTHER WORLD, whose emissaries have for thousands of years lurked unseen around us.

A strange and terrible civilization has milked humanity of the things and people it needs or wishes—the luxuries, the expert artisans, the lush lovelies its ruling caste wishes to grace its harems.

Not until Dick Blair became involved in interworld doings was there any risk in the robber-baron proceedings which had enabled a few pagan priests and their lupine allies, to live on the fat of a world and its work which was not theirs. Thereafter—but we have no intention of spoiling a very good story indeed. THE OTHER WORLD is one we feel certain you will enjoy all the way.

Our Hall of Fame Classic for November is one of the most famous science-fiction stories of them all—THE ULTIMATE CATALYST by John Taine. This story of the bizarre fate of fugitive Dictator Kadir in his South American jungle palace, as engineered by Doctor Beetle, is one which few if any previous readers have been able to forget.

The author's name is just about all the recommendation any story needs, so we shall content ourselves with saying that THE ULTIMATE CATALYST is beyond question one of the very finest the HoF has ever run.

There will, of course, be other stories and features. The currently available short-story and novelet roster includes William Morrison, Jack Vance, Margaret St. Clair, la Brackett, Rene LaFayette, Clifford D. Simek, Arthur C. Clarke, Ray Bradbury, L. Ron Hubbard, Henry Kuttner and many others. So the issue should be a lulu!

ETHERGRAMS

GOOD crop of mail this month—and a fat one. So we won't waste time but will open with the following—

COSMIC ERRATUM
by Sylvester Brown, Jr.

Dear Editor: Congratulations on getting as fine a writer as Harness. F into Y was tops. There appears, however, to be one error in the story—namely negative time circumventing the impossibility of speeds greater than light. Einstein's formula $M_0 m \frac{c}{\sqrt{c^2-v^2}}$ will still give imaginary mass whether v is positive or negative as $(-v)^2 = v^2$ and does nothing to cancel the negative sign in $\sqrt{c^2-v^2}$ which introduces $\sqrt{-1}$ for $v > c$. Thus, whether the ship is traveling in positive or negative time, the mass at velocities in excess of light will still apparently be imaginary.

Second best in issue with the latest Conquest of Space story. They're getting better and better.—65 Gordon Street, Allston 34, Massachusetts.

All of which is Greek to us—but we are inclined to take your word for it, Sylvester, especially as several other epistolary pundits have jumped upon the Harness story for the same mistake.

SEPARATIST
by Karl V. Zeiger, Ph.D.

Dear Editor: There exists a species of letter writer which seems to revel in the amount of space that it can command in the fandom section of any magazine. Its primary function and delight pertains to the perpetuation of a technical language peculiar to its type, a generally pointless discussion on obscure subjects with others of its kind, a level of literary criticism compatible to the reactions of a laboratory animal with Pavlovian conditioning, and a childish pleasure in the mere publication of its ill-organized gibberish.

The fact must be admitted that fan mail indicates to an editor the general trend of thought on the contents of any issue of his magazine. In a certain sense fan mail is a necessity to any editor if he is to ascertain the tastes and dislikes of his customers but does it necessarily follow that the total clientele must be faced every issue with a group of published letters with the usual aforementioned characteristics?

In the May, 1949, issue of STARTLING STORIES there are eleven pages of fan mail that could have provided additional entertainment to most readers by the substitution of stories for the fan letters. Assuming that the eleven pages of letters are the entire amount of fan mail received, or at least that portion sensible enough to be published, what percentage of the total readership of STARTLING STORIES does the fan mail represent? If the percentage is large or small it still does not merit simultaneous publication with the science fiction in any particular issue.

The primary purpose of science fiction is entertainment. Secondarily its function is to provide an outlet for logical and orderly prognostication. Fan mail is a necessary adjunct in the discovering of fans' peculiar tastes but it does not constitute an essential part of the science fiction magazine's primary aim, namely, entertainment. The small portion of fan letters that are really constructive in their context merit the publication of fan mail but such publication should be separated from the promulgation of science fiction.

The above opinions lead to the suggestion that a separate

fandom periodical, containing nothing but fan letters and editorial comment thereon, be published simultaneously with each monthly issue of any science fiction magazine. That is to say, science fiction's magazines, relieved of their fan mail burden, would be available to most readers with additional entertainment in the form of stories.

Such separate publications would still provide the editor with a necessary and vital measure of public opinion on his periodical from among the few really constructive fan letters containing criticism on any aspect of science fiction. But, most of all, it would relieve the average reader of paying for the characteristic gibberish in which most fan letter writers love to flounder and would provide him with an additional story or two.

The majority of fan letter writers seem to have an affinity for stewing in their own-fashioned mess from pure and simple love of it. That is their privilege but it is not to be justified at the expense of the reader who wants entertainment first. Separate publications of science fiction and fan mail will let each party pay a distinct and specified monetary sum for his own love.

The constructive criticizer is a rare specimen in fan mail as can be attested by the general tone of the commentaries and criticism of Kuttner's "The Time Axis" in the May issue of STARTLING STORIES. Witness, for example, as a specific example a paragraph contributed by a Marion "Astra" Zimmer. His comment read:

"Let me make it even clear. If he killed the Nekron, then we must assume that the Nekron existed for him to kill. But if he killed the Nekron, then the Nekron never existed. If he did not kill the Nekron, he existed—but only because it was there for him to kill. In other words, the Nekron existed only because he killed it, and by killing it he proved that it had never existed."

Reducing the above to the terminology of sentential logic with the provisions that:

A—equals—"He killed the Nekron."

B—equals—"The Nekron existed."

the following formulas are obtained:

[(A B). (A–B). (–A B)]

[(B A). (A–B)]

It does not require an I.Q. over 55 to reduce the formulas to a tautology and present their essential identity insofar as saying nothing new or creative is concerned. Lewis Carroll had just as much fun writing "Alice in Wonderland" with its logical paradoxes as Zimmer had writing his comment on "The Time Axis" but the difference is that Carroll was an author and Zimmer is not. If the latter and other like personalities prefer to see their literary masterpieces in print let them compete with Kuttner and Carroll on a legitimate basis by submitting manuscripts instead of fan letters to the editor.

The delicate balancing of fictional elements in stories like "Flight into Yesterday" is heartening to any reader but the unbalancing quality of the fan mail in the pages that followed tended to drag STARTLING STORIES down to the subamoebic intellectual level. Would separate publication of science fiction and fan mail solve the problem by letting the average reader relax with real fictional entertainment and the average fan letter writer stew in his own mess?—417 East Bloomington, Iowa City, Iowa.

Methinks some of you had better send Mr. Zeiger, Ph.D., a copy or six of those fan publications devoted exclusively to the type of correspondence he so evidently abhors. Well, it takes all kinds, we always say, though we don't pretend to understand who or what makes them. Such a solution, however, is impossible under present publishing conditions. Incidentally, Mr. Zeiger, the Zimmer you mention is a she.

THE NEXT CONVENTION
by Charles R. Tanner

Dear Editor: This one, according to all reports, is going to be a honey. I mean this Science Fiction convention at Cincinnati, over Labor Day week-end. A good-sized bunch of science fiction authors are going to be there, and one editor all the way from England. And illustrators, too; and there will be fans galore.

Most of the old fannish activities of former years will be continued, and there'll be a couple of new things to surprise the fans with. The response of the fans and readers to the request for membership in the Convention Committee has been surprising and it looks like this'll be the most successful one in a number of years.

I'd like to say one more thing to the readers of S. S. before the convention takes place. This is not a closed organization, it is not a secret society, or a mystic clique with grips and winks that would leave a stranger out in the cold, wondering what it was all about.

We're an unorganized bunch of lovers of science fiction who try to get as many people as possible together every year to talk science fiction and to meet the people who make it. Everybody is welcome, and although you can join the Convention Committee for a dollar, you don't even have to do this to be welcome. Why don't you pack up and visit Cincinnati on September the 3rd, 4th, and 5th?

You'll have the time of your life and you'll never regret it.—2007 Sutter Avenue, Apt. E, English Woods, Cincinnati 25, Ohio.

Amen, Chairman Tanner. It should be truly gala.

CNEOHT INDEED!
by Mark Moody

Dear Cneoht: How nescius can one be! And if I had greeted you in the days of old English, thusly, or described you during the glory of Rome, ditto, you probably would have knocked my block off!

Which is my objection to "The Loot of Time" as a Hall of Fame nominee. (SS, March)

The story contains a neon-sign-on-a-rainy-night error—glaring, that is. Fifty-Sixth and Twentieth Century mankind speaking alike!

Just a few hundred years ago a cneoht was a most lowly servant. In time, the word became cniht, a servant of the king, his bodyguard. Later, it became kniht with its present meaning of knight. Originally, the "c" was pronounced. Thus this word, as have practically all of our words, changed in spelling, sound, and meaning.

Nescius, by the way, was Latin for "no knowledge" or "ignorance." In turn, it came to mean "silly." Then "precise." Now we think of a nice girl. Hmm!

So, in "The Loot of Time," characters Smith and Cameron would have understood each other as well as Yancey and One-Eye. In other words, words they wouldn't!

However, relenting—and simonizing the citrus—all this palaver does not indicate that I object to your magazine. TWS and SS are my favorites in scientification.—Tempe, Arizona.

Ave atque valum et pax vobiscum. Amo, amas amat. Veni, vide, vici. Ventre Saint Gris et bebop! Who let such Anglo-Saxonisms into Arizona. We thought there were nothing but Indians there, with perhaps a light dusting of chili powder. Seriously, Mark, your point was well taken—but since stories must be comprehensible to the readers of the era in which they see print we have no solution to offer.

THANKS
by Anonymous

Dear Editor: Best thing I can do is take time out and say "thank you" as I was taught. You were very kind to print my letter and you are being increasingly kind in forwarding all of these letters I've had. I hope the wielder of the red pencil isn't suffering from writer's cramp because of me—but I wouldn't be surprised to learn he (she?) is.

I've been having a perfectly delightful time with my letters and they've been seeing me through a bed period—including a trip to the hospital and having a bad hip mended. They'll help me through about six months in a cast.

Nearly all of the letters were fine and pleasant with a very few insane ones and only one vicious. Seems I'm lucky—most people who fuss about in monasteries deserve to be killed. Poor woman!

I've done my best to reply to most of them—several forgot to include names or addresses.

I was delightfully amused by the way so many of the letters took me to task for my seeming lack of respect for the "nice people" of my homeland. One letter even went so far as to warn me of possible dire results! My humble apologies to all the people of the SIDHE!! I don't want to find myself in their tiny black books! I've been peering in all the corners for fear I'll find representatives of the Phooka, the Shefro, the Lurikeen, the Dullahawn and the Fear Dearrig (the Red Man). But I've not seen any!

Once more, thanks to all of you from "Irish"—as so many

of the readers have called me—for all of the letters and magazines they have sent me. I'm becoming very well informed (?) about the denizens of scattered planets and asteroids and such-like. Sincerely . . .

Well, we're glad it worked out so well and, needless to say, have been ourselves heartened immeasurably by the response (we're still getting occasional letters for you, Irish) of our readers. We think they must be a pretty swell bunch all around. The red pencil, for your private information, is our own. Here's hoping your hip mends more quickly than seems possible. Perhaps some of the Dullahawn or Phooka will give you a hand.

EVIDENT SANITY
by Rickey Slavin

Dear Editor: I have at hand the May issue of SS. I am no longer surprised by the evident saneness of your editorials. As each month goes by they become more and more intelligent and are a credit to the magazines they appear in. Whether the fact that I am now immersed in college studies has anything to do with it or not, I haven't had as much time to read and I have cut my stf reading down to two or three magazines per month—of course, TWS and SS are always included. Anyway, I have switched to books of late increasingly for other reading.

As for the May stories—there was only one that I would rate lower than very good. That was "Flight into Yesterday." Perhaps the fact that I was trying to absorb Chaucer's "The Miller's Tale" and Harness' "Yesterday" at the same time may have had something to do with it. Every now and then I would stop short about a thought that the Miller was talking about no arms or that Alar was saying, "Gebrocke the signe and noche the ligne." After that I quit.

Eando Binder is as good today as he was twelve years ago. Another HoF classic that has stood the test of time. "Forgotten Envoy" was very good. The evident care that went into the details of the story was what I liked. "Incredible Destination" was extremely good. The plot was not new but this particular treatment was. "Dimension Praecox" was good but not as superior as some humorous stories. What happened to the Kuttner hillbillies? Now that they have gone, I appreciate them more than I did then. "Immorality" was a very neat explanation of the feelings all of us have at one time or another. Give this guy some more like this to work on. For instance, when you open a book and think, "Why, that's exactly what I've always wanted to say. The author describes it perfectly."

"History Lesson" left me cold. If it was supposed to be funny it failed. If it was supposed to move me at all emotionally it failed. However, it was a fair little piece. I am happy indeed to see an article like Willy Ley's in the mag. After hearing him speak at the ESFA I was doubly interested in his story. He has an uncanny facility for making highly technical things understandable to me.—1626 Coney Island Avenue, Brooklyn 30, New York.

Hmmmmph! Yes, we've read the Miller's Tale ourselves, Rickey. You were a trifle previous in mourning the Kuttner hillbillies. The Hogbens were out in force in the June TWS, as you have doubtless already noticed. A nice letter.

HAIL AND SLEET
by Les and Es Cole

Hail, Son-Of-The-Sun: Did you know that the day after the May issue hit the stands we were being investigated by the FBI? It seems that there was a little matter of spelling Pi, p-i-e, and our faces were so red, that, well—!!! We kneel in defeat and acknowledge that we were caught with our pies down.

What with so many people jumping the gun on "extra-terrestrialism," we'd like to throw in our two cents. We also like to sound erudite, so call this "Remarks On Some Extra-Terrestrial Lithology."

Now, as many of the stf. writers would have us believe, the first reconnaissance after discovery expedition to, for example, Mars will include a physicist, a chemist, a linguist, an anthropologist, a social scientist and, in addition to the crew, Miss Henrietta Hasenpfeffer, who is a genius in each of the above fields as well as being a built-in pin-up and who is also along to provide a statistic for some future Kinsey Report. (We dare ya, parce that sentance!)

Hero, who is physicist, looks at Henrietta and says with a deep gasp (He suffers from sinus), "Miss Henrietta, will you go out on yon gravel peneplain (here the Coles tender apologies to Emmet McDonald) and collect a few fossils?" Henrietta, who was busy while in school supporting her two-headed brother and who never had a chance to learn the difference between Merychippus and Plectofrondicularia, nods and gayly skips outside into the waiting arms of 14 Martians who are, at best, lewd and lascivious creatures.

We exaggerate of course but even Van Vogt in his exploration stories missed an important point. Two essential technicians on reconnaissance will be a cartographer and as geologist (In the order of importance). But no one is going to find copper or diamonds or uranium or iron on the surface of the planet under exploration. All of which brings us to our main thesis: just what natural materials will be found when Man reaches the other worlds of the solar system?

Using what little astronomy we've had and riding the doctrine of uniformitarianism a little too hard, we can come up with a guess.

We think that on our nearest neighbors we're likely to find the same broad groups of rocks that we have here on Earth (But migawd, have you considered the intrinsic and scientific value just one cubic inch of Martian sandstone would have on this planet?).

Start with two assumptions: (1) the Earth is indigenous to the Solar System and (2) the Solar System is comprised of material which came originally from the Sun. Anyone reading this who denies either or both assumptions can stop right now. The rest of this won't hold together.

Through uniformitarianism (which, incidentally, states that the same geologic processes are going on today that have gone on in the past and at roughly the same rate of time. And be warned: This doctrine isn't a "law"; it's an assumption most geologists work with) we can project Earth geology to the other planets. For instance, there are mountains on the Moon. Regardless of the rate of time involved in making those mountains, we think it fair to state they were formed in the same way. Ditto for Martian polar ice-caps.

Projecting what we do know and using some negative evidence, let's talk about our three nearest neighbors.

Mars will probably have lithology most similar to Earth's. All the main forms of rocks will be present (Igneous, Sedimentary and Metamorphic). However, due to the present state of supposed aridity, the later formations (corresponding to our Neogene (?) and later) will be essentially desert-like in aspect. Sediments may be coarser and should include sands, conglomerates, (and arkose and graywacke?) because of the predominant mechanical weathering. Mars' color may (and this is a big, whopping may) be due to a planet-wide condition well suited for red bed formation.

If we knew the origin of the Moon, we'd be in a better position to guess its lithology. However, we'll proceed on the basis that Luna is of Solar and not terrestrial origin.

That being the case we can't very well look for lunar sediments. There may be some—but these will be inconsequential in the sum total of the Moon's geologic column. Igneous and metamorphic rocks should be present, and we'll stick our necks out and state that igneous rocks will predominate (However, which came first, the chicken or the egg?).

Venus is a problem. Who knows anything about her (The planet, that is! Don't anyone give us any of your Louys talk!)? We may expect all forms of rocks but because of the high CO_2 content in the atmosphere, limestones are gonna be mighty thin. If there's any water at all, we seriously wonder about the formation of clastics (With one exception: there must be some rather pure quartz sands!).

The above discussion was the nucleus of an article we never got around to writing. We liked it, though. Who's to say we're wrong?

And, Son-of-the-Sun, don't get discouraged when we're rough on the editor, contributing authors, etc. It's our way of showing friendliness. (Honest!) Besides, we've left ourselves open for plenty lately (See above discussion, see Es' remarks on time machines). It's not our fault you've a bunch of dundredheads writing and reading the mag!

Just to make you feel good, "Flight Into Yesterday" takes top honors this month. Gad, the millennium is here! It has been a long time since the novel outranked the shorts. Or could it be that the shorts have gotten so rank that the novel, by comparison—but, no! We won't say it.

LaFayette's "Incredible Destination" took second place. Third goes to Ley's article.

And so, (heh, heh) PIE-ayes, we close with the enjoinder to listen in next month and hear "Jack's Adventures in Extra-Terrestrial Geomorphology."—1616 Costa Ave., Richmond, California.

With which we return, somewhat whirly of head, to our stalagmite perch in a certain

cavern beneath the A-bombed ruins of Manhattan Isle (value $24.00 in wampum and firewater) to study the rock formations around us. We have no intention of "parceing" the above or any other "sentence". You Coles really can throw it!

WALRUS SPEAKS
by Captain Kenneth F. Slater

Dear Editor: The time has come, the Walrus said, to write to STARTLING STORIES . . . so here goes nuthin'. May issue arrived in a rather tattered condition, but still readable. Not suitable for putting into my collection, so I must get another copy. Cover was a bit torn . . . but personally, I could not have cared if it had been completely deleted. I am not sure what it symbolized—but as there was nothing in any story about gigantic folk climbing up small tilted skyscrapers, I presume it was symbolical in intent, even if diabolic in fact. Pity. The execution of the idea was excellent . . . and you can take that both ways, too.

Stories: FLIGHT INTO YESTERDAY was good, but I feel that the use of swords . . . and raypistols . . . is always rather incompatible. However, I will let that slide. The idea and treatment were excellent. HoF CONQUEST OF LIFE was good—nice selection . . . but how about some of the Dr. Winter stories? I forget the author, but it was about a chap who hibernated for lengthy periods. I always thought the final yarn was tops.

And then we came to "Forgotten Envoy." Nice twist to an old idea, Sam. But you could improve your style, and not give the twist away quite so early, uh? Rene LaFayette was as usual good, but he'd better vary the "prophet has no honor" theme a bit, otherwise we shall have a surfeit of those pretty soon. Dimension: Praecox. Blair Reed. That title is in small letters, and expresses me thoughts on it. IMMORTALITY by John McDonald was a nice use of oft-used "basic"—but what a horrible thought! I hope John is wrong. I favour the theories of Dunne personally.

HISTORY LESSON, by friend Clarke . . . well, I liked it, but not up to standard. Surely we can export better than that, Arthur? Nevertheless, it gives one to think just how some of our currently-in-use ideas, mechanisms, and whatnot might be interpreted by future races, of man, or others. Articles both good and not technically over my head, which is one of your competitor's faults; or too utterly childish, which is the fault of another (In my opinion, of course).

And now for a little British news—the new society which I forced into being just before Xmas, '48, has now reached a membership of 84 (April 1st figures, but they ain't fools!) Our Fan-financed magazine NEW WORLDS has finally hit the stands this month, and is a very nice job. Numbering has carried on from where the previous publishers left off, so current ish is No. 4. American fans interested can write me. Sub rate is $1.50 for 4 issues. Production will be rather irregular, owing to paper shortage, but we hope to make two more issues this year.

My wife is going to join me in Germany about the middle of May, and if there are any American sf or fantasy enthusiasts working in the Western Zone on the Berlin airlift (British sector) I'd like to meet them. I'll ask 'em round to dinner, too—as long as they ain't too many! If there are any of them, on that job, who read this, any British Army Officer controlling G.C.L.O. on the airfields will know my HQ, and be able to put 'em in touch with me—most of 'em will know my name and I am placed pretty near the airfields. And that seems to finish the paper, so adios and all the best and keep up the standard.—H2, 13 Gp. R.P.C., B.A.O.R., 23, c/o GPO, England.

Thanks for writing, Captain Kenneth—and for the generous invitation. We wish we were in position to take advantage of same. But when you tell us to "keep up the standard" you inevitably remind us of what has come to be known as Woodhull's joke.

Woodhull, currently a Manhattan lawyer and a class ahead of us in college, belonged to the undergraduate humorous publication for which we supplied jokes during our university years. At the end of our freshman year we were voted in as an editor and the entire board came around to our rooms to notify us.

They were going to tell us Woodhull's joke and, if we laughed, defer our election. The joke was simply to be a picture of a couple of chaps, standing at sunset near a summer hotel whose flag was being hauled down. One of them was to say, "Ah, I see they're lowering the standard at the hotel."

We don't know what would have happened since the magazine had not informed us in advance of their visit and we were otherwise engaged that evening. But whenever we hear anyone tell us to keep up the standard we wonder with a shudder at what might have happened had we been in and laughed—which we probably would have done.

PEACE OR WAR
by Rose Davenport

Dear Editor: Thank you for printing my letter in the March SS. I have made many new friends and now belong to the Golden Gate Futurian Society.

"Flight into Yesterday" is a very unusual story and very, very good. The HoF story I had read before but it still was worth rereading. It would be worth while at the 50th reading.

"The Road to Space Travel" is a highly interesting feature and I want to congratulate Willy Ley for his excellent articles. The short stories were all right but my favorite is "Forgotten Envoy." More, please, Mr. Merwin, Jr.

I am looking forward to the next issue as usual but more so this time. George O. Smith writes a science fiction story that is a humdinger.

"The Ether Vibrates" was very good this time. Thanks again for printing my letter but, editor, I don't want to go to China. How about the first passenger rocket to the Moon? More up my alley.

I think the time is very near when the world will see either peace or war. The non-stop trip of the B-50 around the globe is proof that world war would be suicide. I saw the movie "The Boy with Green Hair" the other day. In the movie a remark is made—"If everyone thinks there will be war, then war it will be, but if we want peace everyone has got to think, talk and live peace." I hope we succeed in peace because I want the future rockets to be passenger rockets, not war rocks.—137 Cherry Avenue, South San Francisco, California.

Either peace or war, eh, Rose? You sound a little like the detective in Octavus Roy Cohen's famed "Come Seven"—who, when confronted by a robbery, said profoundly, "This is either an inside job or an outside job."

At any rate, you echo our sentiments as we do yours.

BRUISED AND PERUSED
by Joseph Burns

My dear Mr. Editor long I've perused
Both STARTLING and WONDER and never abused. . . .
Nay, never once took pen in hand to inveigh
Against any story you've slanted my way.
But now, by my halidom, this thing must stop
You surely would not have me blowing my top.
Well here it is, then, the whole crux of my cavil. . . .
I can't stand these people who go by time travel.
In a nutshell the thing is impossible, I ween,
But not any more so than in a machine.
In fine, sir, it shatters that law so renowned . . .
Of cause and effect . . . vainly tries to confound
The wisdom that rings down the hall of the ages
And makes us revere so the words of the sages.
Of course I could argue . . . , as just why in hades
(Oh pardon me, please, I forgot there were ladies)
Just why don't we see these time travelling goons. . . .
Why isn't the place cluttered up with balloons;
Round spherical balls from the future or past

I never have seen one . . . have you, may I ask?
So please, sir, a Martian who looks like a djinn,
A mutated telepath minus a chin. . . .
I'll take them with nary the sign of a shudder
For, after all, these things are possible, brudder;
But mister, I beg you, entreat you, in rhmye
Please stop all this gadding . . . this travelling in time.
—1209 So. 72nd Street, West Allis, 14, Wis.

So you'd have us confined to the here and the now.
The prosaic present doth suit you, we trow.
You'd ne'er duck the pterodactyl on the wing
Nor listen to futureworld Rhinemaidens sing,
So how shall you weigh the aurochs on the hoof
If from genteel time travel you hold self aloof?
And as for the now being full of balloons.
You'll find same, scores daily, in comic cartoons.
So down with the wisdom that rings through the ages
The prattle of oracles, mewling of sages,
We'll take our machine, to the future we'll fly
And then take a jaunt in the past by and by.

SIT DOWN THEN
by Edward N. McKeown

Dear Editor: A person can stand only so much and this person has stood more than enough. We were so blamed mad at that juvenile review of the TORCON REPORT in the May STARTLING that we thought it best to cool down a bit before commenting on it. Then just as we were ready to write a cool, scientific, dissertation on the subject along comes the June TWS with more childish prattlings. That did it!

But to take things in chronological order. A publication like the TORCON REPORT must be, of necessity, a labour of love. Every copy must be sold to pay for the materials alone. Well, at the time we sent the complimentary copy to you the TR was about half paid for. We figured, incorrectly as it turned out, that a review from you would give it the boost to push it over the top. Since no effort was spared to make it the best we felt that the review could be nothing but favourable. But what happens? A sloppily written, superficial statement giving the reader absolutely no information! All that was wanted was a standard review as would be given to any other fan publication.

Did you ever stop to think that millions of people in the world do not know me—who I am, where I live, etc.? Unlike a letter to Ripley a missive with nothing but my name on it will never reach me. Then you say, "The TR is finally in. . . ." Look at it this way. The TR was mailed to you early in November, just five short months after the TORCON. Containing 63 pages, this represents over 600 hours of labour put in by yours truly alone. Figure it out. It means that in addition to working for a living I was putting in at least four hours a day on the TR. "Finally" he says—nuts! Granted you do say it's a god job—"The best of its postconvention kind we have yet seen." Of course it's the best—it has to be—it's the first of its kind! However that's all water under the bridge so let's go on to the more recent errors.

In the June TWS in a column entitled "The Frying Pan" you rave about an article called 'The Seven Ages of Fan." Let me refresh your memory by quoting from your introduction. "Perhaps the best description of a stfan was written and delivered in the form of a speech at last summer's So-called World Fan Convention in Toronto—the TORCUN—by Robert Bloch, one of the better known. . . ."

Oh brother! Let's pick this quote to pieces error by error. "So-called World Fan Convention. . . ." Well, the correct title was "Sixth World Science Fiction Convention," and since we numbered among our delegates fans from the U.S., Hawaii, and Canada, we do not feel it should be the "So-called."

Again, heading for our dictionary, we find "World" defined as follows: ". . . any separate sphere of existence; as the literary world." Now, is your face getting red? Fans, because of their mutual interest in a particular type of literature, might be said to form a world within a world. So, we are perfectly justified in calling it a "World" Convention.

From this to the speech. As you would know if you had taken the time to read the TR, a truly worthy documentary report, you would know that Bob's speech was entitled, "Fanntasy and Psychology," and far from being the trivial little mess that you reprinted, was a serious, critical analysis of the reasons behind fandom and Science-Fiction writing. The only trouble with publishing his tongue-in-cheek article rather than his real speech is that, although to fans it is funny and allowances wil be made, to average readers it is a sarcastic history of fans by a man who has been sadly disillusioned by fandom. It might be taken seriously.

Maybe your interest in fandom isn't sufficient for you to bother to spend the time learning a little about it. However, it has always amazed me that a person of your intelligence would attempt to discourse in an authoritative manner upon a subject about which you are so ignorant!—1398 Mount Pleasant Road, Toronto 12, Ontario.

Well, don't say we didn't give you a grievance corner all your own, Chairman McKeown. Perhaps the information divulged above will help the promulgation of the Report. We thought we were treating it kindly—we meant to. It *was* a good job. As for the Bloch article in TWS's Frying Pan column, if anyone took that very funny piece seriously we don't think he merits much concern from you, ourselves or anyone else. The response we have received to date is highly reassuring on the point.

However, accept our apologies for causing you such unintended annoyance. We didn't mean it and Oscar Wilde effectively defined a gentleman as a person "Who never hurts another unintentionally." Selah!

SOLD ALREADY
by Toni Gabriel

Dear Editor: Never have written a fan letter before and I don't know quite how to start but here goes. I've only read four of your magazines (SS) but I'm sold already. Will rate the stories as I found them but first I'd like to make a request. If there are any readers who would be willing to part with any back copies of SS or TWS I'd appreciate it no end (will pay for them naturally). Every second-hand bookstore I go to seems to be hoarding the mags for themselves or relatives so I am unable to obtain any.

Will rate the stories A-B-C-D-E-F.

WHAT MAD UNIVERSE—Fredric Brown AAAA (September SS, 1948). Couldn't get enough of the story—had to read it twice to be satisfied.

TETRAHEDRA OF SPACE—Miller A
SHENADUN—MacDonald D
RAT RACE—de Courcy B
SANITORIS SHORT CUT—Vance D
ONE OF THREE—Wesley Long C (March SS, 1948)
SAILED THE MIGHTY DARK—Belknap Long B
DON'T LOOK NOW—Kuttner E
MISTAKE INSIDE—Blish E
CLIMATE DISORDERED—Sprague B
PENULTIMATE TRUMP—Ettinger D
BRINK OF INFINITY—Weinbaum F—(May have been a Hall of Fame Classic but I didn't like it nohow.)
AGAINST THE FALL OF NIGHT—Clarke A (November SS, 1948)
ISOTOPE MEN—Pragnell C
HUMPTY DUMPTY HAD A GREAT FALL—Belknap Long B
DORMANT—van Vogt C
RING AROUND THE REDHEAD—MacDonald B-plus
VISITOR—Bradbury D
UNSPEAKABLE McINCH—Vance B
BLACK GALAXY—Leinster AA (March SS, 1949—love that man!)
SOUND OF BUGLES—Williams A
LOOT OF TIME—Simak AA
MAGNIFICENT FAILURE—LaFayette D
HOWLING BOUNDERS—Vance C
MARIONETTES INC.—Bradbury B-plus
TURNOVER TIME—Loomis C

Well, there you have it—my humble opinion. If those stories are a sample your magazine is well worth the price.

Keep up the god work, you have a permanent fan from now on.

One more thing before I sign off—I think your artists do a wonderful job and I wish your readers would stop panning Bergey. Just because his pictures don't look as the reader imagines them is no reason to gripe.—3606 Archer Avenue, Chicago 22, Illinois.

Welcome, Toni, it's nice to have another Miss favorably disposed toward our more or less humble efforts. Hope you get some of the back issues you want as a result of the printing of your letter. Write us again.

PREMATURE DISCHARGE
by Dirk Schaeffer

Dear Editor: I know it's sheer insantity to do this: writing in to you before I read the mag I'm writing about; but then, I believe in trying anytihng at least once. The culprit (or something) that inspired this sudden burst of energy, is the Ether Vibrates column. Honestly, I've never read a better column anywhere, any time.

So much for bouquets. (Don't go away yet, I may think of a few more before I finish.)

One of your readers—give me a minute to find out who he (or she) was—oh, here it is—wotdya know, it wasn't a recent letter, after all—it was the two paragraphs of MacAdams' that you reprinted—anyway, he warns against readers answering each other from one ish to the next. Before I got mixed up in that mess preceding this sentence, I was gonna say that I agree with him, but that I shall go on complimenting and insulting and criticizing previous letters until someone figures out a method by which I can do it in the same issue. After all, criticizing the other guy's letter is half the fun (at least) of writing to mags.

Sy Brown, Joonyer turned out a neat little (hah) letter, ('smatter of fact, all of his recent ones have been good) in your May issue. The only point on which I disagree with him is his opinion of Kuttner. Although this may sound cryptic, I infinitely prefer Lewis Padgett's stories to Hank's. Somehow the stories Kuttner signs "Padgett" are much better than those he signs "Kuttner." By the way, that lad has entirely too many pen-names. But then, if I had my way, pen-names would be abolished altogether.

Ye gods, am I in a rut! I can find nothing whatsoever to ridicule, criticize, or insult, in either Tom Pace's or John Daves' letters (which two, along with Sy Brown's I rate as best in the ish).

You know, Ed, unless Bradbury is going under the pen-name of Blair Reed, he is conspicuous by his absence, in this issue. How long has it been since he last did that?

Everybody else seems to be philosophizing, so I think I'll try it, too. By way of introduction, let me return to Sy Brown and his comments about the first Rod Cantrell story. Quote: I was given to understand that such monstrosities as "The Story of Rod Cantrell" were just the type you were so avidly crusading against. A blatant piece of hack with the much-editorially-maligned evil dictator to the fore and the invincible holier-than-thou hero right behind. Unquote, and very, very well-spoken, Sylvester.

It is my opininn, Ed, that entirely too much propaganda is entering into science-fiction. Aside from the fact that it invariably makes for a corny story, it is extremely unfair and—to use a very hackeneyed expression—undemocratic. Too, too many stories that are now coming out deal with future civilizations; therefore they must at least touch on the form of government in these civilizations; this is usually totalitarian in form, and is then invariably destroyed by the hero.

All of these stories represent propaganda against—shall we say—another country. Now, before I go any further, I want to make it expressly clear that I DO NOT IN ANY WAY FAVOR THAT COUNTRY, NOR DO I WANT TO SPREAD PROPAGANDA FAVORING HER. I just want to see if there is any measure of justice in this country.

As you remember, Ed, I wrote you a letter along this general line before, and you didn't print it. I won't blame you too much if you don't print this, either. To return to my original philosophizing: I wouldn't present this propaganda at all, if this other country were allowed to retaliate.

But it isn't. The minute anyone says anything in favor of her, he gets investigated. Therefore, Ed, I don't blame you if you don't print this. But if you had any sense of justice at all, Ed, you could at least prevent stuff like "The Story of Rod Cantrell" from being printed.—803 West Center Street, Alma, Michigan.

Yeah, we know what "The Story of Rod Cantrell" sounded like in a propaganda way. However, it contained a very nifty pseudo-scientific gimmick, furthermore one which became the basis of Leinster's late novel, "The Black Galaxy." So we were, to a certain extent, stuck with the story, fulminations against dictatorship and all. Actually, Leinster was aiming more at the late, unlamented Axis than at the power over whose American press representation you seem so disturbed.

Anyway, we printed your letter.

ALL IN ALL
by Andre M. Weitzenhoffer

Dear Editor: I've just finished the May issue of STARTLING STORIES. All in all a good number. "Flight into Yesterday" was one of the best yarns I have read for some time. There is, however, it seems to me, a serious error starting page 55 with the Einstein mass relation. Alar arrived at the conclusion first of all that the ship had travelled faster than light. But a positive velocity greater than that of light would make the mass M of the ship imaginary, that is, meaningless. Thus far I agree.

On page 56, Alar reasons that hence, the velocity of the ship must have been negative and that this makes everything all right. I contend that this does nothing of the kind. The quanity v-square is positive regardless of whether v be positive or negative, and $(c^2\text{-}v^2)$ is always negative when v is greater than c, regardless of the sign of v. Hence the sign of v does not affect the meaning of M. Or again, M is still meaningless when v is negative. I would also like to add that whether time is positive or negative depends entirely where one places the origin on the time axis, and that one may have negative velocity and positive time.

One more comment. I did not care too much for Dimension: Praecox.—311 So. Blvd., Norman, Oklahoma.

Mr. Harness' postulation seems to have troubled a number of readers. But perhaps he is right and Einstein wrong. Who knows or will know until the experiment is actually made?

Next case!

NO BEEFS
by Darte Darius

Dear Editor: Your May edition of STARTLING STORIES is no doubt the best piece of fiction I have ever read. I wish especially to praise Charles L. Harness on his superb novel "Flight Into Yesterday." It was magnificent. In fact it was so wonderful that words become inane. I have never seen a story in that particular vein before and it is new and refreshing. I hope to find more of Mr. Charles L. Harness in your next issues.

Though "Flight Into Yesterday" was a trifle deep on first reading it became "startlingly" clear when I reread it. Mr. Harness is nothing short of genius to have contrived such a masterpiece.

This is my first fan-mail letter of any kind to any person or persons. I wish to repeat my expression of praise to the editors of STARTLING and to Charles L .Harness for "Flight Into Yesterday."—Upper Lake, California.

Now that is the sort of letter any editor and/or author likes best. It is also the sort that most readers don't find entertaining. None the less, we're grateful.

ANY VIEWS?
by Jim Goldfrank

Dear Editor: It seems that there are some people in our midst who wish to do away with the "Hall of Fame." These are mostly the older fans, however, who have read the stories.

This is what a lot of my friends think ought to be done—take the HoF out of the zine; then every once in a while print a pocket-book, or pamphlets. You used to do it, and no doubt have the facilities for it. If anybody has any views on the matter, I'll answer anyone who writes me, and send a summary of what everyone thinks in to the Ed. OK?

am interested in getting at least one copy of every stf

zine that ever existed. Anyone have cheap copies for sale?—1116 Fulton Street, Woodmere, N. Y.

Well, we don't intend to do it, Jim, older fans notwithstanding.

SO THIS IS HARRIS!
by Larry Harris

Dear Editor: Congratulations on Charles L. Harness! You were right, in the last issue, when you called him the writer of the year. His style and involved plot-technique remind me of A. E. van Vogt; his action and fast-moving prose remind me of E. E. Smith; and his characters remind me of Kuttner and Bradbury. All in all, sir, a very satisfactory lead novel.

Before going any farther along the story line, I'd like to thank Mr. Charles Strong (who is, from a few cartoons of him I saw, in constant danger of his life from the bites of an unusually ferocious lion), the members of your 10 E. 40 Street staff, and yourself, for giving out with such friendly "hellos" to four bewildered, bedazzled, and benighted High Schoolers on an exploring trip through your place March 8. So, thanks.

The rest of the stories rate:

2) History Lesson . . . A. C. Clarke. This is the tale I thought would never come; the one to match this author's "Rescue Party."

3) Immortality . . . MacDonald. This could have been treated better; see the lead novel.

4) The Incredible Destination . . . Rene LaFayette (?). I like this series. Are there more coming?

5) Forgotten Envoy . . . Merwin. This deserved better, but Clarke, MacDonald, Harness . . . well, you hired 'em.

6) Dimension: Praecox . . . Blair Reed. Unless this is Kuttner, it's a good new name. Even down to 6, they were good this month. Don't take it to heart.

7) The Hall of Fame . . . E. and O. Binder. Pfaugh. Pfaugh. Pfaugh. Mr. Otto Binder is now writing for the comic books, where he belongs. Who requests these moldy-cheese epics?

Your covers, unhappily, get worse and worse. No depth. Willy Ley is, of course, a great asset; he lends tone and an engaging personality that is even more so when filtered through a German accent. Oh, for sono-tapes!

Your editorial is of course thoughtful and well-written. Thanx.

The letters; suffice it to say that I'm thankful Astra's collitch-work let up for awhile. (She calls herself Mickey now but I refuse to.) A thoughtful and interesting letter, as is the gal herself. I feel very happy.

Why JAMES E. HAMILTON, Jr., in caps? Nephew?

Who dares to imitate the immortal Archie? I'll tear his ears off.—8701 Shore Road, Brooklyn 9, New York.

James E. Hamilon's caps were a mistake a mistake a mistake amis—semi-colon . . . . He is not our nephew. In fact, he isn't even our niece.

SLIGHTED CAUSE
by Marion D. Spoelstra

Dear Editor—This is my first letter to any magazine on any subject. However, I have been reading your magazine since I first discovered it on the newsstands. I must say that I consider it a cut above the average in fantasy or science fiction—take your choice—publications. I purchased the May issue yesterday and the first thing I turned to was "The Ether Vibrates" section.

I can agree with the point made but it seems to me that the cause of the article stated was slighted in an important point. Of course we all know from past history that the truth will finally emerge for all to see. We also know that the discoveries and theories of Galileo were suppressed for centuries until the absolute power of the church was broken—and there lies the danger.

In the absolute power of Soviet Russia we see the same situation that existed when Rome was all-powerful. When a culture denies all knowledge except that which is acceptable to its rulers it is undoubtedly doomed. But its death may last over a long time. It would be unfortunate if some scientist who discovered some information vitally needed to develop mankind, or for that matter anything which would aid mankind, should become "an enemy of the state" and so have his discoveries destroyed or hidden and so keep humanity in the dark longer than necessary.

It seems to me that a magazine which deals in possible sciences should be the first to decry the action of the Soviet Academy in refuting a theory (Mendel's Law) given general credence in favor of one that is generally discredited. Particularly when the action is plainly political and has no scientific basis taken into consideration.

We can be sure that it was done to whip some wavering scientists into the party line and was used to embarrass some others who were probably out of favor with some two-for-a-nickel politician. It seems like folly to me to sit placidly by saying that truth will win out, when the very means for discovering truth are under attack. And " 'Tis by our follies that so long we keep the Earth from Heaven away."—Box #469, Guymon, Oklahoma.

We agree a hundred per cent, Marion. Perhaps you may find it simple to understand the so-called "mysteries" of the Oriental mind if you remember to consider same equivalent to that of a ten-year-old child. The mysteries then have a way of becoming all too plain. Until they grow up we can do little.

BIT OF A LETTER
by George W. Earley

Dear Editor: Here we go with a bit of a letter to "Dear old SS." Being a S.F. reader of a few years, but never much of a letter writer, it has taken quite a bit of aggravating for me to take typewriter in lap to write to you.

I have just finished going over your May issue with a fine tooth comb, electron microscope and Geiger counter and may I say that I owe you all an apology. In the not too distant past I had relegated all S.F. mags other than Astounding to the discard, but after reading your May ish I must say that you seem to have collected a couple of good stories.

The HoF idea is a good one and Binder is a good writer. I eagerly await the publication of him in book form.

Flight into Yesterday—Harness. Hmm, seems to have received some ideas from van Vogt's superlative Weapon Shop series. Especially similar is the Society of Thieves and their avowed intent of no offensive attack on others. In my estimation this is an excellent story and will be a HoF classic some years hence.

The Incredible Destination—LaFayette. Not bad, but what government official rubbed Rene the wrong way?

Forgotten Envoy—Merwin, Jr. Ho, hum, could have really been developed into something better, much better.

Dimension: Praecox—Reed. Better it should go into the trash basket than into print.

Immortality—MacDonald. Rather thought provoking extrapolation of a rather common occurrence. The guy's good—and consistently good, too.

History Lesson—Clarke. Cute, but could have been better if shorter.

Now we come to the Features, a most excellent part of this particular mag as opposed to a certain rival mag published in Chicago.

TEV: An interesting and necessary part of any decent mag. Aside to R. R. F. Bailey, R. A. Heinlein is available in Book form "Beyond This Horizon," Fantasy Press, 1948, and has four more books coming out this year from Shasta Publishers, 5525 Blackstone Ave., Chicago, Ill. Fantasy Press has an English repreesntative, E. J. Carnell, 17, Burwash Road, Plumstead, London, S.E. 18. In mag form Heinlein may be found in ASTOUNDING, S.F. and The Saturday Evening Post. Hope this helps you.

Articles by Farnsworth and Ley were excellent. Of course anything by Ley is bound to be. Keep up the good work on this score.

S.F. Bookshelf is an excelent feature but should be kept a little more up to date if possible. Divide and Rule is almost out of print by now.

S.F. Fan publication rating scheme is much better than one in a certain rival, but a price list (complete) would be appreciated by all.

And now for a little knocking on ye olde ed's head. Seems that you sneer at R. R. Smith's rating idea. Must say that this is rather short-sighted of you. After all ,the fans are the ones who make and break the authors and a single rating scale of each month's stories would help the authors in seeing how well the stories are received by the Fans. If you would like to see a good working example of this take a look at the Analytical Laboratory in Astounding S.F. The rating scale is simple and very effective and doesn't take too much time to compute.—4807 Montgomery Lane, Bethesda 14, Maryland.

You deny us the right to sneer? Very well then. But you speak of awaiting the appearance of Otto Binder in book form, talk of Heinlein being available in ditto. We have never met Heinlein in the flesh but

O. Binder looked singularly unbookish physically when last we saw him. Perhaps he had yet to go to the binder's. All right, we apologize, but we had to chew back with something.

TIME TRAVEL TAKES ANOTHER
by Clarence A. Tilger

Dear Editor: I have read your mag for about a year but this is the first letter I have ever written to any mag. This is a standard opening in The Reader Speaks and The Ether Vibrates but the improved quality of the stories makes this at least a probable one. The stories in the May issue were on the whole good except "Dimension: Praecox" by Blair Reed. Even though I assume that I have neither the experience to judge a story or to write one something about this story rubbed me the wrong way. A story along this same line was "The Mobius Strip" sometime back and was very good. The other stories come in this order: 1. "Flight into Yesterday" and "Conquest of Life"; 2. "The Incredible Destination"; 3. "History Lesson," "Immortality," and "Forgotten Envoy" tie for third.

Since I have exhausted all of my comments on the stories and have read that you want ideas in The Ether Vibrates I shall now try to give my reasons why time travel is impossible. Do I hear the Editor scream and babble "No, no, no! Not that of all things!" However, that is so and the reasons are these: To travel in time you will have to be traveling in motion. The next question is what kind of motion? It isn't the motion of the earth around the sun, the earth's motion could be speeded up and it would be the same for all of our lifespans. We cannot travel back in time, for the past is fixed so the future is the only direction in which time travel is possible. The time we live by is the wearing down and the building up of our bodies; therefore to travel in time one would have to go into a state like suspended animation and one could do this at a temperature of absolute zero. This is, however, impossible and time travel as it is in stories is also impossible.

This paragraph will be full of comments. First I am in perfect agreement with your no pen-pal stuff, etc., as it is very boring. Now to comment on the stories; "Flight into Yesterday"—Harness—was good but it contained at least one paradox. If Muir-Alar had changed the universe he would cease to exist the minute he changed it and what happened to Alar? I think that the author found that he had an extra character and left him with an unsatisfactory elimination or, to put it clearer, left him in a void. Also if the past is known one cannot change it.

"Rocket Target No. 2" and "The Road to Space Travel" were good. "Conquest of Life" was the best reason so far for continuing HoF. All in all, it was a good issue. Now YOE (Ye Old Editor) what, just what has hapened to my subscription? TEV may not be the place to ask this and I will accept any explanation but what happened? If this gets printed will I laugh!—6220 York Street, New Orleans, Louisiana.

Start chuckling. We don't know what happened to your subscription. Perhaps you forgot to pay it up. As for time travel, the big hole in the head of the idea is that fact that the Earth, yesterday or last year, was a tremendous distance from where it is today. Ditto for Earth tomorrow. The author has to do mental gymnastics with the close-universe theory to come up with any theory even faintly plausible. We know—we wrote one recently!

LI'L BOOKS
by W. C. Butts

Dear Editor: I've been a reader of your type of fiction since 1928, but this is the first time I've ever written to any magazine with hopes of getting my letter published in the letter column. And I wish you would print this letter.

This is what I want. I and another fan are going to publish a set of booklets. All of these booklets will be printed in a professional manner but with stories by amateurs only. What we need and want are stories by amateurs. These booklets will have only amateur material in them, such as the stories and the illos.

If any fans that ever wrote a story for any of the fanzines want to take a chance and get their stuff published, send their stuff to us. For every story and drawing we use we will give a complete set of booklets. These booklets will run in sets of six.

The stories must run around 5000 words or more and be strictly amateur. Anyone that ever sold a story for no matter how little must not send their stories in, as this is for those that never tried to sell their stories. We are not going to try and compete with any pro-mags but are going to stay strictly on the amateur side.

Any fan that sends in material must enclose postage for returning of their material in case we cannot use it. All stories and drawings are to be sent to this address.—2058 E. Atlantic St., Philadelphia 34, Penna.

Better learn to spell amateur, bub. We corrected it for you. But good luck with the project and let us see whatever you get in print!

OTHER PLOTS
by Jack Marsh

Dear Zodiac: May issue of S.S. arrived safely with 164 pages of stf enjoyment. Who painted the cover? Could it be Lawrence-Stevens? Not Bergey. The dame looks more like a woman than the goddess of perfect beauty, so it's not Bergey. Also the man is human.

I haven't yet started on the stories, but they must be good, otherwise why would they appear in STARTLING STORIES?

Now about this subject of new (?) pleats . . . mathematical material is all right, but don't run it into the ground and, if you'll pardon this ancient, moldy decayed phrase, break it off. Naturally, in deep algebra a hundred million plots can be found, but let's take them slowly. Pick one out every once in a while, but not always.

Where to get other plots? I have a few ideas I might try out some lovely day about dimensions. Believe me, it's original and different, this idea of mine. I was also thinking about something like this: men go to another planet, or star system, or galaxy, and find some alien science-fiction mags. Translation brings a lot of new kinds of stf stories. (They didn't find any kind of animal life on the alien world, only plants and old ruins of a now dead civilization.)

It seems that most of these stories are connected with some kind of life neither plant nor animal, with the heroes always some kind of mammal . . . from brief descriptions, they seemed to be anthropoidal. But it was never quite clear just what the words meant that pertained to this alien life.

Then the explorers leave the alien city and find their space ship wrecked. Everything except inorganic matter was gone. You see on this alien world would live minds . . . in minerals! And they devoured all organic matter they found, except, of course, plants. They ate a lot of plants, but left enough to reproduce so they wouldn't eventually starve.

Well, that plot's a little corny, I know, but I have some that I haven't been able to class under all the branches of stf. They just can't be called anything. Oh, they're science-fiction all right, by my ideas aren't connected with inventions, dimensions, time, war, exploration, invasion or any other. I've got some new stuff, I think.

Attention, Vol Molesworth of Australia! The International Scientifantasy Clan can help you get all the U.S. stf mags you want. Write to the address given with this letter for details.

And now, Mr. Editor, when is Bok's sequel to "The Blue Flamingo" coming? I'm going nuts from waiting.

One of the letters in the May ish says that humor must not be literaly thrown out of TEV in SS and TRS in TWS. I ugree. (That "u" was put there on purpose, for 'u" are important.) If it wasn't for u who would be willing to read a letter, especially by me, from any fan.

Astarita . . . a good artist indeed. He started in one of your competitors, I believe, but now he's rating a crack at the great, the one and only, SPOTLING STORIES . . . I mean startling stories. Also you have swiped Rene LaFayette, Rog Philips, and A. E. van Vogt. Cheater! How can other mags keep going if you're going to get a monopoly on everybody? Just for that, I'm not going to get another ish of your old mag until the July ish comes out! So there.

And about this Sargeant Saturn, Snaggie, Froggy, Warty, and Xeno. . . . That stuff was okay in the days of the stf supermen and the adventure stories. . . . You remember, no doubt, Capt. Future, John Carstairs, Gerry Carlyle, etc. Gone. Dead. As is space opera. Let it rest undisturbed in the past.

Say, how can time be a dimension. All matter travels through it, yes. Like Ed Hamilton said in an old Capt. Future yarn, time is a river, and the current carries the Earth and all other matter along it. But . . . matter must be going along this in one of the right angles we have, for a river current is in 3 dimensions. Only the dimensions move. That's the only difference. Time is just the 3 dimensions in motion.

I think that dimensions beyond our 3 cannot be called any word we know. It remains as that old, old phrase states . . . the 4th dimension cannot be conceived of by 3 dimensional people.

Like the experts say . . . a 2 dimensional creature, length and width being its dimensions, would live in a place that is absolutely flat. No depth nor height would exist there. If it did the 2 dimensional people couldn't see it, for their eyes would be 2-dimensional, thus could see but 2 dimensions in everything they looked at. See? If 4 dimensions are here, we won't be able to see them. But I hardly think there are, for this is a 3-dimensional land.

If I'm wrong, please explain. I'm getting dizzy.—505 Vine St., Jonesboro, Ark.

And we're getting dimensions before our eyes, Jack. You'd better go home and soak the old head in something.

CONCESSION
by Robert A. Rivenes

Dear Editor: It seems that it doesn't take much to start an avalance in stafandom. I hereby concede that F. Brown is not a newcomer. I guess you get sour if you read too much of one type of fiction.

Contrary to popular opinion I think it is not too difficult to predict the form of the future future fiction. At the turn of the century, it was sufficient if an author just mention the word "science" in his story to classify it as stf stuff. The average reader still thought of that subject as something that was done by bearded old men who were slightly mad and who ventured out in the daytime only to return to their coffins at night.

H. G. Wells in "The Time Machine" limited his scientific explanation to a few pages of banter about the fourth dimension. The method of time travel was dimissed by just the mention of a conglomeration of apparatus which was the machine. And the reader was satisfied. Any further delving into scinetific explanation would have been embarrassing to writer and reader alike.

Today the picture has changed quite a bit. The atomized reading public has become more demanding. An M.I.T. or an N.T.I. degree is becoming the prerequisite of an author. Scientific explanations must be a combination of real truths and unknown and unprovable concepts such that A. Einstein would be satisfied. A growing trend of writing is the business of taking a long established theory and refuting it.

Tomorrow (providing there is one) the thing will look something like this. Each scientific explanation in a story will be provable in the reader's private lab. The story itself will constitute a thesis for a degree. The only fiction in it will be the plot to be followed by the characters. In other words, there will be no such thing as science fiction. The weird thing about it is that you don't know whether the above was written seriously or jokingly.

Or another way would have every scientfic law be disproved. The thing to watch for in that case is when the force of gravity doesn't believe itself a force and everyone starts floating off into the wild blue yonder.

Well, you put yourself over one window and I'll put myself over another and we'll shudder together.

"Flight Into Yesterday" is typical of the above-mentioned story lines. Science everywhere except in the beginning, where it sure was needed. I don't doubt that some readers were discouraged by the beginning and quit reading. If they had stuck with it they would have been more than satisfied with the rest of the tale, however. Keep Chuck chucking.

"Conquest of Life" was pure melodramatic corn without any surprises. I can see why the Binder boys went into the comic book field.

"The Incredible Destination" and the rest of the series a fine preview of the fiction to come. With LaFayette heroes aren't always made.

"Immortality is one of those marvelous thinkers and I don't lisp.

"Forgotten Envoy" shows that stfiction need not be entirely divorced from other types of fiction.

"History Lesson" was made totally ineffective by the heading. Clarke calmly denounces our whole scientific method with one small phrase. I wonder what false ideas scientists are now making using other like circumstantial evidence.

Bergey's covers are getting more and more to mean less and less. And two lab illos in one issue is kind of pushing the limit.—157 N. Euclid Ave., Oak Park, Illinois.

For a lab-crazy specimen you shouldn't beef, Robert. Somehow, we suspect, future future fiction will continue to exist along lines less limited that those you hint at. The stuff will simply move onward, upward, inward et cetera, keeping a couple of steps or more ahead of applied and theoretical science. It's done so to date with increasing success.

BACK ISSUES
by Agnes O. Rundle

Dear Editor: I have been intending to write you for quite some time, but I never seem to get around to it.

I just finished reading May, '49, issue and it's as good as usual. Two of the stories impressed me especially. "Conquest of Life" by Eando Binder. Wasn't there a follow-up story on the lives of Vera and Tony when it was first printed? The other story was "The Incredible Destination" by Rene LaFayette. I seem to be partial to a connected series of complete stories.

The other stories were all very good. Keep up the good work.

After trying to figure out where I can build in more bookcases, I find my house is just too small. With great reluctance, I am having to part with some of my magazine collections including Wonder Stories from 1930 to now, some quarterly issues from 1931 and 1932, and many other assorted items plus a few copies of my Famous Fantastic collection. I want to complete the latter collection and need some copies from the years 1939, 1940, 1941, 1942 and June 1943. I'm in the middle of a couple of good stories and no more magazines. Any takers?—419 Frederick Street, San Francisco, California.

Stewdents? Methinks something should and will be done.

GOLLY AND GOSH!
by Rodney Palmer

Dear Editor: By golly, STARTLING STORIES never looked better. I've read Conquest of Life, Forgotten Envoy, Incredible Destination, Dimension: Praecox, Immortality and History Lesson. I've even looked into the articles (which I usually skip), and found them worth the examination. I'm almost wishing for something to criticize—I don't know why. Sheer boredom from having the best in science fiction at my fingertips I guess (No, I ain't been psychoanalyzed yet.).

But, thinking it over, I miss Jack Vance and Magnus Ridolph. We were all a little rough on the bearded gent with the gleam in his eye—but let's admit it: Those first yarns just didn't match up to par. Later, with the Howling Bounders, etc., Vance more than made up for a bad start. More.

I enjoyed Conquest of Life terrifically, but it appears that anticlimatic ending dated it just a trifle? Forgotten Envoy opened nicely, held up all through though I felt somehow I was being strung along with an old idea sustained by clever fact-witholding.

Dimension: Praecox deserves a rousing round of applause. One of the very few science-fiction stories in your jointly edited mags I've ever laughed at—and I was ill when I read it. I just laughed right out loud and the folks round about thought—well, whatever people think when people laugh out loud. I doubt if Blair Reed can repeat (Henry Kuttner, perhaps), but in my book he can try. Uproarious reading. Immortality, and History Lesson were a little better than adequate. I'd like to crush a word in here about Incredible Destination too, if there's room.

ID struck me as science fiction in the old tradition, but with all the drag and lag eliminated. It's a tightly molded story and it's loaded with a feeling of realism. It's stuff like this I keep paying my grimy quarter for—and the more the better.

Do I seem to be contradicting myself a wee bit here—Rene LaFayette being, after all a mere woman? Well . . . I don't always mean every little thing I say in my letters, and anyways I'm reasonable (I hear dissension.). I learn as I go along. Okey?

I only read about four chapters of the novel so I haven't much to comment there. It opened like the doorway to a maze, but I'll struggle through it. I can tell from here.

This letter column is dry! Heavens, somebody's got to break it up. It's congested with dust.

I want to get in a suggestion, though, before I get too near the bottom of this page limit. AT LEAST ONE SPACE ADVENTURE STORY IN EVERY ISSUE. Good ole hand-to-hand combat—a real villain with a waxed mustache just visible through his duralite space-hood. There's emotional release in such stories—they're relaxing when professionally done.

Heck, I like the deep stuff too, like FLIGHT INTO YESTERDAY. But after the mental workout—the dessert. Asking too much? Maybe I have atavistic tendencies. I've always screamed for such stuff. I loved Captain Future—and I still

believe your best author is Edmond Hamilton.

From the standpoint of the polished craftsman this has been a pretty rough-hewn letter, without enough sly wit and humor to satisfy me this time. . . . But I've been away from this machine too long. Maybe next time it'll be a little more readable.—226 West 60th Street, Chicago 21, Illinois.

Aren't you sweet this time, Rodney. And remind us to notify Miss (or is it Mrs.) LaFayette. Especially since "she" is very much male and red-headed. Thanks for an unexpected chuckle, fella.

WOT—NO BEMS?
by Ron Stone

Dear Editor: I have before me the May 1949 ish of SS, and herewith are my comments on same.

1—Cover. Here is something really Startling. This contains three innovations that surprise me immensely. (1) No BEM. This is not too surprising, however. I think you have had them without BEMs before. (2) This is surprising. Underclad females are bad enough, but nudes! Great Ghu, what next! (3) Now we come to the really surprising part. The woman in the foreground is wearing more clothes than the man! Maybe you're trying to attract female readers to the mag? Honestly, though, couldn't you get just a few more clothes?

2—Flight Into Yesterday—this is good. Give it about five stars if you want to rate it. This would be on a basis of ten (o.k., ed., no more ratings, I'll stick to simple comments). This story had a sort of van Vogt atmosphere about it. Are you sure that Harness isn't—no I won't even ask it.

3—Conquest of Life—good. Keep the HoF going. I like it.

4—Forgotten Envoy—New twist on several mediocre plots, but very well written and very readable. Let's see more from the same author (aside to Tom Pace, this author is not Kuttner).

5—The Incredible Destination—I like this series. Please keep it going—in both mags, if possible, so we can get more stories quicker.

6—Dimension: Praecox—Ghu! No! If you gotta have filler—By the way, does anyone who reads this get a faint recollection of George O. Smith's story "The Mobius Trail?"

7—Immortality—good, but much too short. On the other hand, maybe there lies its beauty. I dunno.

8—History Lesson—Shades of O. Henry! Whatta twist. I kinda liked it. On the whole, the ish was pretty fair.

Not pen-pal stuff, but I just wanna say to Tom Pace, and anyone else who may be wondering, MacDonald is MacDonald. He is a member of the Central New York Science-Fantasy Society. He used to live in Clinton, New York, but is at present vacationing in Mexico.

Incidentally, if this letter gets printed, I'd like to announce the fact that the Central New York Science-Fantasy Society is in existence. Anyone interested, please get in touch with me.

By the way, if anyone has some spare time, I wish that they could figure out this paradox for me. Suppose we postulate an irresistible force. Now wait a minute. Don't stop reading already; I haven't even mentioned immovable bodies. In fact, they don't exist in my paradox. The aforementioned force is irresistible. Nothing can resist it. Now, suppose this irresistible force starts out from a given point, and it spreads. Now, if the universe is curved, and who am I to argue with Einstein, this force, after an incalculable length of time is going to make a 180 degree turn, and come back at itself. But the force started out in the other direction too. Therefore, it is going to meet itself on the other side of the universe. But it is irresistible to anything, and that must include itself. Now you have two irresistible forces meeting, even they are but two parts of the same force. What happens????? I shall now leave, while I go quietly crazy trying to figure this out.—Box No. 61, Clinton, New York.

The result would be either stalemate or mutual annihilation, depending upon the forces, their directions, velocities et cetera. Ask us a toughie next time. We guarantee an answer, even if it may not make sense.

WELL, SHE EATS
by Virginia L. Shawl

Dear Ed: For this letter—for any letter to TEV—one should be flanked with a Roget's Thesarus, a good sized dictionary and any good book on how to acquire a large dose of science in six easy lessons. Why—why—do I always wind up with such a large inferiority complex after wading through your very fine and highly intelligent reader's section?

For six weeks I convince myself that while I am no shining light of intelligence, I can still earn a living, eat regularly and pay my income tax. Then comes "Startling" and the TEV, and I am right back in the same old hole again.

Allow me to come forth and speak for that great unsung, unwept and unhonored group, those that read stf for the sheer simple pleasure of reading stf. If that be treason, then in the words of that great patriot, Patrick Henry, do your darndest with it.

Unfortunately for the biological future of this great nation . . . we know nothin' about the Mendelian theories of heredity . . . the laws of nuclear physics . . . how to build a rocket ship . . . or how in H . . . you'd run it if you had it! We just read it for FUN!

What has finally broken the dam? All these lovely, literate letters condemning those who write frothy, unliterate letters to various editors. Don't forget, my sweet little pals, that we pay out our money too for the mag. But it is time that someone pointed out very clearly and firmly a few laws of life and literary pursuits.

Science-fiction as yet is primarily fiction. Everyone that has learned how to decipher three syllable words is not automatically a budding scientist. Some of us prefer to escape from bills, taxes and how-am-I-going-to-afford-a-new-car through the pages of stf. Instead of the more heady joys of hoisting our derriere on a padded seat at the local dispenser of bottle joy, smoking opium or other practices frowned upon by polite society.

When they start discussing ways of making a tight little group of serious thinkers, and out with the rest of the debris that clutters up the TEV, I start simmering and forgetting all those nice little principles that had been carefully injected into me in my earlier years.

It is fully understood that you cannot print every letter that comes to you. It is a hot blast at some of the characters that come charging across its pages, waving their white banners. Correct me if I am wrong, but it is my impression that STARTLING is printed for the people, of the people's wishes and by the people. That it is still designed to furnish entertainment, and not solely designed to bring forth startling (no pun) discoveries or tailored to meet the requirements of a few highly cultured brains.

This discussion corner generally brings forth two schools of thought. One school stating that all who write in, with the exception of the writer, are fans. And all fans are mentally immature. The other school states firmly that unless you are a fan and belong to the inner circle of fandom you are a lost soul and eternally damned to the outer circles. Fit only to pay out your money and sit open-mouthed and wide-eyed at the feet of the demi-gods of fandom. You pays your money and takes your choice.

To the rest of us poor little lost sheep—it shapes up like this—we are average, we want to be average and we fully intend to stay average. We want to read in peace. We want to write nice, gentle, average letters of praise and blame. And we do not want a group of fevered brains breathing down our collective necks because we can't take up a highly involved discussion of mathematics on a four-dimensional plane, or chat chummily on the best way to raise potatoes on the moon.

Having proceeded to condemn myself to whatever purgatory is reserved for ye average reader, I shall make myself scarce. It is quite useless for anyone to try to find me. I am dyeing my hair—changing my name—and leaving town tonight.—Freeport, Illinois, R. R. 3.

Send us a code message, stating destination and time of arrival and we'll grow a mustache (or probably two goatees in our case) and join you, Virginia. Hurrah for henna rinses!

LETTER FROM A SQUARE
by Joe E. Dean

Dear Sir: As a square peg in a world dominated by round holes I have come to lean more and more heavily on fantasy and stf. as an escape from a life that I do not find entirely to my satisfaction. This is my first letter to a stf. mag. If it is printed, fine. Perhaps it will put me in communication with other square pegs.

STARTLING STORIES has improved greatly since I read my first copy—that was the one with Weinbaum's "Martian Odyssey" as an HoF feature. Since then, the plots have grown more and more complex and space has become ever deeper.

We fans have suffered some hardship. We have been

subjected to a series of "timely" stories about Nazi generals and atomic wars in which the menace from outer space was always easily identifiable with one existing nation or another, but there have been a slue of good stories that were straight stf with no propaganda angle other than that calculated to sell the story to the reader.

A staunch advocate of humor in stfantasy, I enjoyed "What Mad Universe" most of all the lead novels you have run. Fredric Brown has written several yarns that are rich in both laughs and science and my chromium helmet is off to him.

The May issue of SS could have been worse. "Flight into Yesterday" was a bit too loosely hung together to suit me, but some of the situations were good. Shey was a most adequate villain.

The LaFayette series makes wonderful reading fare for a square peg. It is pleasant to imagine that one is not really maladjusted but that everyone else is.

Of all the features in the magazine, however, I like TEV best. Of late, it seems to have fallen off somewhat in quality, but that may be because I had become accustomed to certain writer-inners who have ceased to send in their comments.

Marion Zimmer was the only familiar by-line in this issue. Her letters are splendid but I'll bet she wears her hair close-cropped and smokes French cigarettes in a lo-o-oong silver holder. That she wears horn-rimmed glasses is too obvious to mention. The elfin-eye variety that quirk up on the edges.

My suggestions are as follows—no more cave-man stories, more interstellar and intermondial yarns, more jigsaw plots (my trouble is that I anticipate and spoil the story for myself) and above all, more humor. Life is grim and I wanna laugh.—315 West 33rd Street, New York City.

We'll move over and make room for you on our non-mourner's bench—you and Virginia Shawl and a few others. Hmmm—wonder what's become of Zimmer? Anyone know? We haven't heard from her in the proverbial coon's age.

TITLE BEEF
by Marvin Williams

Dear Ed: Well, here we are again (ah—we are, aren't we? Teleportation and that sort of thing, you can't always tell).

STARTLING STORIES. That cheap title has gotten me razzed to high heaven among my friends. THRILLING WONDER STORIES didn't go so hot either. I explain over and over that you can't judge a book by its cover but it doesn't seem to do any good. Only those who have got a copy of a stf mag and read it can know that behind that cheap title and melodramatic cover scene is good sound fiction.

My idea is change your titles. Make them something like SCIENCE ADVENTURE, or FUTURE WORLDS, or TOMORROW'S UNIVERSE. I have never been startled by any of your stories yet, and I have no desire to be. I think it possible to enjoy a yarn without being startled by it.

I know, yer satisfied with the titles ya got. Well, you asked for an idea. There it is. I couldn't think of one last time, although I've always disliked the mags' titles. I decided, since you yearn for brainwork, that I would voice this as mine.

The cover was good again! Imagine, at least eight good covers since last year's May issue! Eight in a year! I like the symbolic covers a lot better than the action scenes. The only good action-scene cover artist is Anderson. Bergey can't do faces well enough to get the right expressions for action scenes.

He is capable of creating a very lovely girl with an ecstatic smile on her face but very lovely girls with ecstatic smiles on their faces do not fit into action scenes. Oh my. When I say eight, I mean for both TWS and SS. That could be embarrassing, since there are only six issues of both mags out a year. The best cover out for all year (since May '48) was the one for the Dec. TWS.

I don't think I need to say that FLIGHT INTO YESTERDAY was darned good. You surely must know it above everybody else. Harness is my favorite as of FRUITS OF THE AGATHON in the Dec. TWS. It was a little dense, as is FLIGHT INTO YESTERDAY in plot, but the writing is terrific in both these pieces.

Harness has a strange way of tangentally telegraphing his next coming events and the stories' outcomes. He is really good. The monkey deal was clever as anything I've read yet. I knew from about halfway through that Haze-Gaunt was going to be him. The microfilm mind idea was clever too. He would be somebody to know. I wonder if he played the horses.

[*Turn page*]

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As are all of Eando Binder's stuffs (well, are and stuff really didn't sound right you know) the CONQUEST OF LIFE had a pretty good plot except for a few minor improbabilities. The writing was faulty though. Their style is fine but they don't take enough time in carrying the story out. The way it ended, it sounded like they had to catch a bus and ended it as quickly as possible.

FORGOTTEN ENVOY was an old idea with a new face. This Merwin is pretty good.

HISTORY LESSON was confoosin' but amoosin'. It was the best of the shorts

INCREDIBLE DESTINATION was next in the shorts, it was more like a novelet but call it what you like. Pretty soon LaFayette's going to run out of Planets. Then what? Alpha Centuri? Lafayette is good at creating personalities. Dolan was one of the best.

DIMENSION: PRAECOX was fairly good. Reed writes nicely.

IMMORTALITY was stinko. Once in a while you meet a guy who is smoking an old cigar that he dug out of a junk drawer. Well . . .

Turning to the gab section now, we meet a disheveled band of hollow-eyed mortals who are clamoring at the gates of the Sanka Company. Sleep they need. Why? They've been up for weeks trying to think up ideas for yer silly mag, that's why. Frankly, I didn't write the last letter to get it printed because I couldn't conjure up an idea, but you printed it anyway you dear, dear—a—dear boy.

Tom Pace, he's my man. Why didn't so many people like The TIME AXIS yarn? Kennedy is gone. Couldn't stand Sigler probably. But now Sigler is gone so if that is the reason for Kennedy being gone, Kennedy should be back. No?

Gwen (how was it a few years ago?) Coyninghayme was pretty hep. She always is. I regret I can't agree with her on McAdams though. So much ego boo to me. It is a pity I don't get a charge out of talking over scientific problems. Then my letters would be six pages long too.

Slavin was hot too. He is always good for a laff. Not because he's funny, just because he's Slavin.

Thanks to Richard R. Smith for offering to tally my results or whatever he said but I'd rather put it in myself. Besides, if that goes over it is going to be a lot bigger job than he thought probably. If you were an inmate in a rest home it might be oke but if you've work to do I don't see how you could swing it unless you burned the midnight oil a lot.

Sneary is gone, beep bip slobble. Don't lie to me. I saw you sic his own little green men on him. Ya shouldn't oughta donnit.

I see you have two articles this time. This is okay but don't overdo it. Both are good, one being a continuation. Willy Ley should try writing fiction. The theoretical ratio stuff is past me but I read it anyway and tried to absorb it. I know that I have learned as much in stf mags as I did in Algebra.

A last word for the illo's. They were all good except the one on 113. Finlay is still up to par. I dislike cross-hatch shadowing though. I have thought it over for a long time and finally decided that I like Astarita. You should feature more of his work and less of Napoli's.—1413 Second Avenue SE, Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

You're right about LaFayette. He is already out of planets and has taken to the starlanes as you foresaw. Still good though. As for Slavin, *she'll* be amused at your idea of her sex. Incidentally, there seems to be a lot of such confusion of late. How come? Some of you eggs uncandled or what? You'll be seeing a lot of Astarita, Marvin. He's a good artist.

Well, we've wrapped up T.E.V. for this issue. Only one poem this time. How come? We'll be seeing you next month in the READER SPEAKS in TWS and then, in a mere sixty days the ETHER will VIBRATE again. *Hasta la vista.*

—THE EDITOR.

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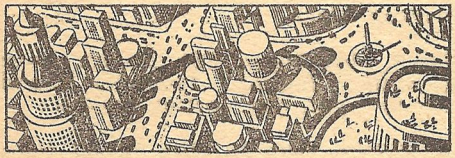
REVIEW OF THE SCIENCE FICTION FAN PUBLICATIONS

AS seems to happen at regular intervals, another collection of Spectator Amateur Press Society (SAPS) publications have arrived, this time from new official Editor Henry M. Spellman III, 75 Sparks Street, Cambridge, 38, Massachusetts. Mr. Spellman implores us to be gentle with him and to use "at least one new adjective."



Well, we'l. try. Here goes—we're going to list them as arranged by Editor Spellman instead of in our usual alphabetical array.

VANGUARD BA-A-AP ! ! !, Walter A. Coslet, Box No. 6, Helena, Montana. One-sheet review of other Sapzines.

GR-RUNK!, Walter A. Coslet, Box No. 6, Helena, Montana. One-sheet comment on recent stf reading by the editor.

ARCURUS, Rick Sneary, 2962 Santa Ana Street, South Gate, California. A four-page job with a pair of entertaining pieces by the Sneary. One tells how to be president of a number of stfan societies and live (by doing absolutely nothing). The other refutes a Lloyd Alpaugh article in a previous Sapzine that Henry Kuttner is overrated as an stf author. For which, cheers.

ISCARIOT, William Voorhees Pierce, 7 West Grain Street, Somerville, New Jersey. In opening editorial Mr. Pierce wonders why he is writing this and confesses he does not know. Despite a gruesomely amusing limerick describing the death of a bee, we fear we must join him in his bafflement.

PROCYON III, Wallace Shore, Box No. 1565, Billings, Montana. A half-one-sheet containing reviews more thumbnail than this of other Sapzines.

RESONANCE, Paul Cox, 3401 Sixth Avenue, Columbus, Georgia. Despite an editorial defending the editor's pride of race (unfashionable, this), a pretty good if young magazinelet. Comments on pre-World-War-One stf trilogy amusing.

[*Turn page*]

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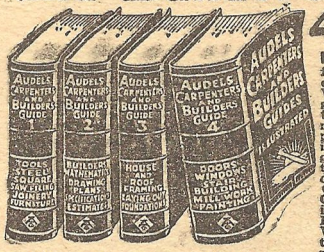

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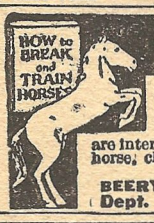

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JOSE-PIEN, Gross (no other information available). A cartoonzine of highly libidinous character and little sense.

SPACEHOUND'S GAZETTE, Joe Kennedy, 84 Baker Avenue, Dover, New Jersey. Kennedy complains that his Sapzine is waning in size, will soon "no doubt be mimeographed on microbes." But it's still funny stuff.

MAINE-IAC, Ed Cox, 4 Spring Street, Lubec, Maine. Most chuckle-rousing item in this large Sapzine (large for a Sapzine, that is) is author's confession of failure to win passing grade in a peculiarly fiendish stf quiz offered in a previous Sapzine.

SUN SHINE, Lloyd Alpaugh, Jr., RFD No. 4, Somerville, New Jersey. In the best of this mailing ex-Editor Alpaugh answers his own fiendish quiz with polished ease and reviews other SAPS' efforts trenchantly—among other interesting things.

SAPIAN, Ray Higgs, 813 Eastern Avenue, Connersville, Indiana. Promising Sapzine spoiled by a very poor cartoon feature.

THE BLACK PIRATE, Telis Streiff (no address listed). We couldn't get beyond the "fairy chess" in this one. Sorry.

NAMLEPS, Henry M. Spellman III, 75 Sparks Street, Cambridge 38, Massachusetts. Thin item in which SAPS new Editor expresses his surprise at winning the election. Tacky.

That for the SAPS. And now let us get down to the more serious business of examining the independent fanzines. The A-list hits what we believe is an all-time high with nineteen different 'zines present, some of them with several issues.

In view of this surprising multiplicity we'll move in at once. Keep an eye open for new fanzines—there are several of merit on hand.

BLOOMINGTON NEWS LETTER, Bob Tucker, PO Box No. 260, Bloomington, Illinois. Published bi-monthly. Free to letter or information contributors.

Tucker's near-professional newszine continues to grow and flourish. Printing is fine, pictures top-flight, correspondence notes cryptic and interesting, book reviews good and "Anthropoidea" hilarious. We're for this.

THE FANSCIENT, Donald B. Day, 3435 NE 38th Avenue, Portland 13, Oregon. Published quarterly. 25c per copy, 6 copies $1.00.

Certainly by now established as the best of the midget-sized (if not of any sized) fanzines. It may be small but it packs more real meat and good fanart in its carefully laid-out and offset pages than any other recent 'zine of its type. Ken Slater's well-packed piece on British prozines and Murray Leinster-Will Jenkins' self-profile and bibliography stand out, as do the artworks of Don Berry and O. G. Estes.

FANTASY ADVERTISER, Gus Willmorth,

1503¾ 12th Avenue, Los Angeles 6, California. Published bi-monthly. 10c per copy, 50c per annum.

This year's Cinconvention gets a well-earned plug and the issue is, as always, the informative and definitive bible of fanz interested in trading for or obtaining back issues. But Herman King has contributed a fine biographical sketch of Edgar Allan Poe (the poet, not the Princeton All-American) which makes this issue of more general readability than it has been otherwise of late.

FANTASY REVIEW, Walter Gillings, 115 Wanstead Park Road, Ilford, Essex, England. Bi-monthly. 25c per copy. $1.50 per annum.

Arthur Clarke leads off the current issue of Britain's best fanzine with a spirited and intelligent defense of those American professional stf authors on whom Moscow recently attempted to hang the tired "lackeys of Wall Street" label. The reviews of news article (by Editor Gillings) are informative and of high level and Thomas Sherican has contributed another installment of his fascinating history of WONDER STORIES, the father of our companion mag, TWS. A good issue of a fine 'zine.

FANTASY TIMES, James V. Taurasi, 137-03 32nd Avenue, Flushing, New York. Published bi-weekly. 10c per copy, 3 copies 25c.

The top newzine of general fan interest continues its up-to-date policies, sometimes managing to surprise even old pros like ourselves. Prozine reviewers, by the way, give it an excellent feature rating.

THE GORGON, Stanley Mullen, 4930 Grove Street, Denver 11, Colorado. Published irregularly. 20c per copy, 7 copies $1.00.

We're glad to see Gorgon back in the running after a publication lapse, as it undoubtedly comes closer to belles lettres than any fanzine currently in print, type, offset or hekto. The art, as always, is ambitious and beautifully presented, with Cockroft, Bunnell and Carson contributing top jobs. Editor Mullen's Unholy Street is unexpectedly good poetry as is Justin Herman's Sonnet to Palomar, while Marion Zimmer's "thee-and-thou" verse is more amusing than offensive. Paul O'Connor and Phil Rasch continue their informative features and George Cowie's Lost Destiny stands out amid a good crop of fiction. A top issue of a top 'zine.

JOURNAL OF THE BRITISH INTERPLANETARY SOCIETY, 157 Friary Road, London, SE, 15, England. Published monthly. Price to non-members, 3s. 6d.

Far and away the most learned of all publications devoted to space travel. Actually the work of a group of distinguished and learned professional scientists, who gather and publish for their own creative interest. Not for children unless they have Einsteinian proclivities. Arthur C. Clarke, whose AGAINST THE FALL OF NIGHT, in this magazine, was memorable, has been appointed an assistant secretary of the BIPS, being himself considerable of a man of science as well as fiction. The January issue discussed chiefly and learnedly orbital bases in space (H. E. Ross) and the atomic rocket (L. R. Shepherd & A. V. Cleaver). We wish our scientists had something like it.

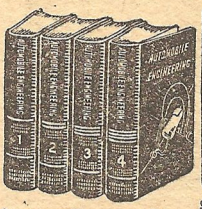
LUNA, Bob Johnson, 811 9th Street, Greely, Colorado. First issue. 25c per copy, 3 copies 55c.

A lively effort by a bunch of Colorado teenagers whose fiction deals chiefly, in this issue at any rate, with haunts and poltergeists and the like. A Paul Banks article on spaceflight presents an amusing contrast to the learned studies of same by the members of the BIPS reviewed immediately above. We hope, in growing up, LUNA'S staff keeps it moving and grows with it. Promising.

OPERATION FANTAST, Joyce & Ken Slater, Riverside, South Brink, Wisbech, Cambridgeshire, England. Published bi-monthly. No price listed.

A sprawling, controversial and thoroughly entertaining

[*Turn page*]



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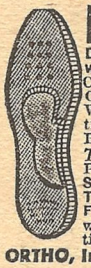

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British effort, which could stand having its hair brushed. This issue features a trading supplement (good) and an article by John Aiken on the adolescence of fandom (surprisingly serious). Lively.

THE OUTLANDER, John Van Couvering, 10358 South Downey Avenue, Downey, California. Published irregularly. 10c per copy.

For the most part sniping at organized Los Angeles fandom, of which the Outlander Society is an offshoot, the Hersheys, Woolston, Sneary and Editor Van Couvering are talented enough to make it worth reading. Funny in several spots but the poetry is ghastly.

PAN DEMOS, Donald M. Kunde, Austin Miller, Paul Dennis O'Connor, 1165 Grant Street, Apt. 208, Denver 3, Colorado. Published bi-monthly. 25c per copy, 5 copies $1.00.

A newcomer, somewhat along Gorgon lines in art and typography but with more of a bent toward essays and criticism. Most interesting item—co-Editor O'Connor's tale of how he and others came to have Hannes Bok finish posthumously two A. Merritt stories. Cover by Bok. Best newcomer of the month.

PEON, Charles Lee Riddle, PN1, USN, 2116 Edsall Court, Alameda, California. Published bi-monthly. 10c per copy, 6 copies 50c. 15 copies $1.00.

A good controversial 'zine—with chief current controversy supplied by Vaughn Green, who assailed democratic government since we are doing nothing about the A-bomb but make them. Anyone would think him against the lovely things. Dr. Keller handles the book review well and the contents list contains work by such other distinguished stf names as Robert Bloch and Anthony Boucher. Improving fast and good to begin with.

QUANTA, Miles Davis, P.O. Box No. 7595, Benjamin Franklin Station, Washington 4, D. C. Published irregularly. 10c per copy, 3 copies 25c.

Leo M. Carroll, Jr.'s amusing short essay on stf time travel is tops in a sassy second issue which also includes a science service quiz sheet (but no answers) containing questions which pertain to science but not to fiction.

THE ROCKET NEWS LETTER, Vincent Story, 5747 University Avenue, Chicago, Illinois. Monthly. 15c per copy, $1.50 per annum.

While definitely not as scholarly as the Journal of the BIPS, this ubiquitous little magazine continues to contain interesting and imaginative anythings that have to do with rockets, past, present and future. It has become over the years a landmark in the fanzine field.

SCIENTIFANTASY, Bill Kroll, 1031 West 18th Street & John Grossman, 1037 West 18th Street, Des Moines, Iowa. Quarterly, 20c.

An excellent sub-pocket 'zine along FANSCIENT lines, but running more to cartoon and fiction than that estimable Oregon fanmag. On the whole the artwork of Don Berry, Jon Arfstrom, Howard Miller and Editor Grossman is superior to the copy, especially where E. E. Evans runs headlong into God. Worthy if not inspired.

SHANGRI-LA, 637½ South Bixel Street, Los Angeles 14, California. Published every six weeks. 15c per copy.

The chronically embattled Los Angeles Science Fictior Society has come up with a special fiction issue, including such well-known stf names as A. E. van Vogt and such lesser dittoes as Con Peterson, L. Major Reynolds, E. E. Evans, Arthur Cox, Kenneth L. Bonnell and Forrest J. Ackerman. Van Vogt's piece is the shortest.

SPACEWARP, Arthur H. Rapp, 2120 Bay Street, Saginaw, Michigan. Published monthly. 15c per copy, 2 copies 25c.

An active, somewhat heterogeneous, occasionally hot fanzine, which varies so in content and quality that it amounts to a virtual grab bag. Plenty of spitbacks but some good juicy ones, too. Nothing, however, of especial note in the early issues of this year.

VITON, Rosco E. Wright & Norman Hartman, 146 East 12th Avenue, Eugene, Oregon. Published bi-monthly. 10c per copy.

Editor Hartman examines the neutrino and Editor Wright, under a thin pseudonym, examines prozines satirically in this newcomer. Each contributes further with poetry, art and/or witty sayings. Fair promise.

WILD HAIR, Charles Burbee, 1057 Normandie Avenue, Los Angeles 6, California. Published irregularly. No price listed.

Another semi-irate offshoot of the LASFS, with ex-Angelo Francis T. Laney contributing the bulk of the copy and Sydney Stibbard dishing up some first-rate line drawings. Resentful and amusingly wild.

And that, at long last, washes up our A's —for the most part a notable list. In contrast, the B-list is sub-normal as follows—

THE AIEMBIC, Norman Ashfield, 27 Woodland Road, Thornton Heath, Surrey, England. Published quarterly. No price listed. Juvenile 'zine from England. Enough said.

THE CINCY REPORT, Don Ford, 129 Maple Avenue, Sharonville, Ohio. Puffsheet for the coming National Fan Convention at Cincinnati.

FANTASY NEWS, William S. Sykora, P.O. Box #4, Steinway, Long Island City, New York. Published weekly. 10c per copy. Packed with its own title. Best one-sheet newzine currently on the stf scene.

DAWN, Lester Fried, 2050 Midland, Louisville 4, Kentucky. Published bi-monthly, 10c per copy, 6 copies 50c. Letters, letters, letters. You can write for this one—by sending a letter.

FLUB, Wallace Shore, Box #1565, Billings, Montana. Published monthly. 5c per copy, 50c per annum. A poem of emotional torture chief feature of this one. Not for us.

GLOM, Forrest J. Ackerman, 236½ North New Hampshire, Hollywood 4, California. Published quarterly. No price listed. 4E sounds off on an LASFS row, Funny.

POLARIS, Dan Mulcahy, 4170 Utah Street, St. Louis, Missouri. Published bi-monthly. 5c per copy. About to enlarge—a sure sign of prosperity. We wish it luck in spite of a rap at ourselves in the current issue.

PORTLAND SCIENCE-FANTASY BULLETIN, 3435 NE 38th Avenue, Portland 13, Oregon. Okay little one-sheet from one of the livest stfan districts in the USA.

THE SCIENCE-FICTION BOOKMAN, Roy W. Loan, Jr., 1746 Columbia Road, NW, Washington 9, D. C. Published bi-monthly. No price listed. A laudable and neat effort to keep fans informed as to fantasy titles available.

SHADOWLAND, S. J. Martinez, 1830 East 15th Street, Tulsa 4, Oklahoma. Published irregularly. No price listed. A newcomer which is an unintentional riot.

STF TRADER, Jack Irwin, 1028 Third Avenue S., Moorhead, Minnesota. Published monthly. 5c per copy. Swapstuff for fans.

Altogether forty-three (count 'em, 43) 'zines of various sorts were treated kindly or otherwise in the above. Which leaves us too pooped to be able to add anything but a hoarse murmur of praise for the vitality of stfans here, there and everywhere. Keep it up if it kills us. —THE EDITOR.

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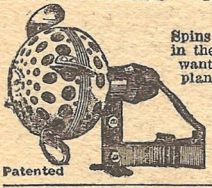
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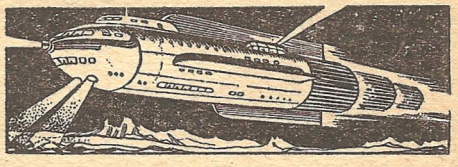
SCIENCE FICTION BOOKSHELF

REVIEWS OF NEW BOOKS

FROM OFF THIS WORLD, Gems of Science Fiction edited by Leo Margulies & Oscar J. Friend, Merlin Press, Inc., 507 Fifth Avenue, New York 17, New York ($2.95).

From time to time, in recent years, there have been proposals that the best of the Hall of Fame reprints which have been a feature of this magazine since its very first issue over ten years ago should be gathered together in anthological form. These proposals have come from agents, from pub-



lishers, from authors and, most of all, from our readers.

Now, at last, the job is done. Selection and compilation have been accomplished by Leo Margulies, Editorial Director for Better Publications, of which this magazine is a part, and Oscar J. Friend, who for many years held down this editorial chair. The best of the Hall of Fame stories are currently available in this volume, which will almost certainly become a must, not only for science fiction neophytes but for veteran readers as well.

The list of authors reads like a magic incantation to those who seek an open sesame toward understanding of the explained fantastic—which is basically what science fiction is. It includes such magic syllables as Clark Ashton Smith, Dr. David H. Keller, P. Schuyler Miller, Stanley G. Weinbaum, Henry Kuttner, Benson Herbert, Jack Williamson and Eando Binder—along with Thomas G. Gardner, Edmond Hamilton, Arthur G. Stangland, Paul Ernst, H. F. Starzl, A. Rowley Hilliard, Louis D. Tucker and D. D. Sharp.

Both Smith and the late Stanley Weinbaum are included twice—Smith with both of his magnificent "Singing Flame" stories and Weinbaum not only with the justly famed "A Martian Odyssey" but with its sequel, "Valley of Dreams," as well. Yes,

it is a list well calculated to make other science fiction anthologists look carefully to whatever laurels they may have garnered to date.

These stories are important to anyone truly interested in stf in a degree far beyond their intrinsic merit, which is great. They are stories taken from the early history of modern science fiction and as such are, for the most part, milestones in the progress of the field from the somewhat primitive "catastrophe" tale of fifteen to twenty years ago to the much more highly evolved character, gadget and alien culture stories of the present day.

The first attempt to deal with an imagined "alien" existence that met with any appreciable success is probably Weinbaum's "Martian Odyssey"—which was also notable for the humor inherent in the author's approach to a subject which had until then been treated only with screams and ray guns.

Smith's soaring fantasy—always retaining a strong but slender umbilical cord of credibility—opened up a path along which other authors, notably Henry Kuttner, have trod with notable success. And the Binders' treatment of immortality as, perhaps, a highly mixed blessing, did much to change the science fiction tone toward eternal life. "The Green Torture," by Hilliard, pioneered in the concept of a sentient plant world and Jack Williamson's "Through the Purple Cloud" was one of the first of an imposing parade of stories dealing with tangential universes.

So if you want to know how science fiction got the way it is—and if you want a record of its growth which is also fascinating reading—you'll be putting in your order for FROM OFF THIS WORLD. It is, for lovers of stf of all degree, a must.

—THE EDITOR.

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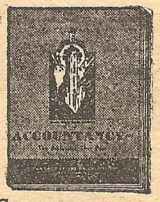

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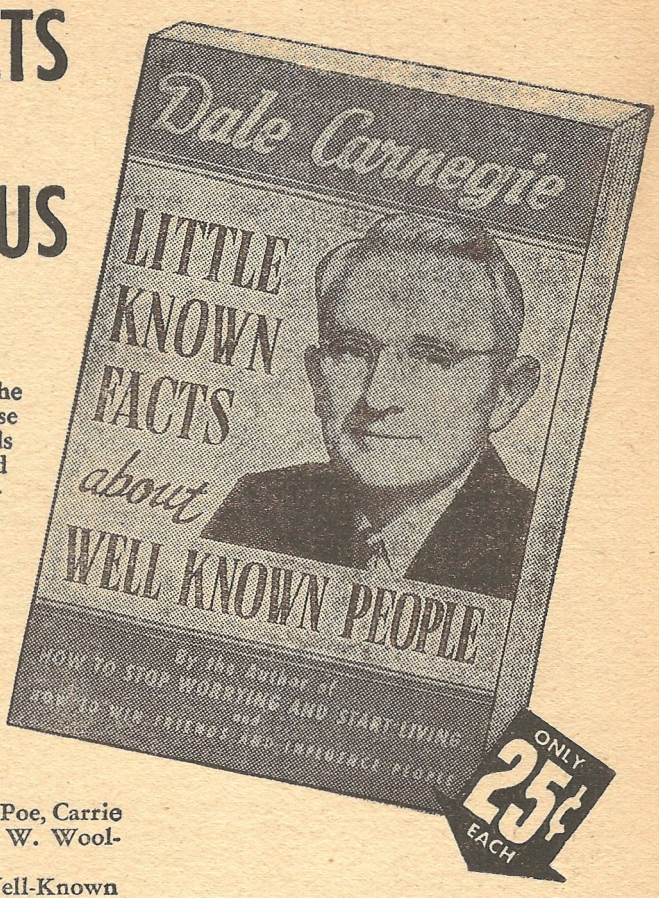

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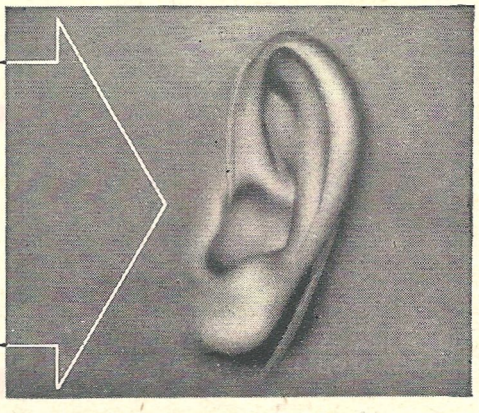

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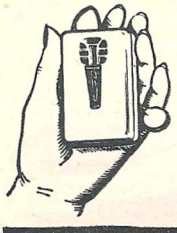

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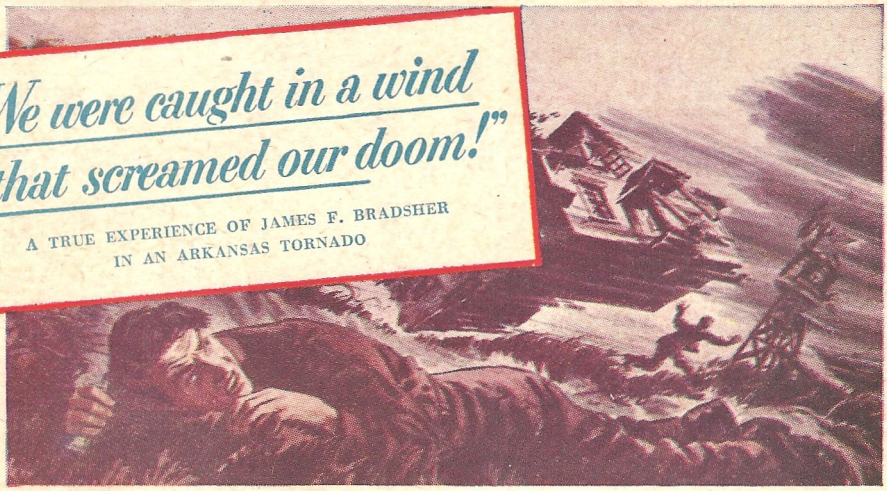
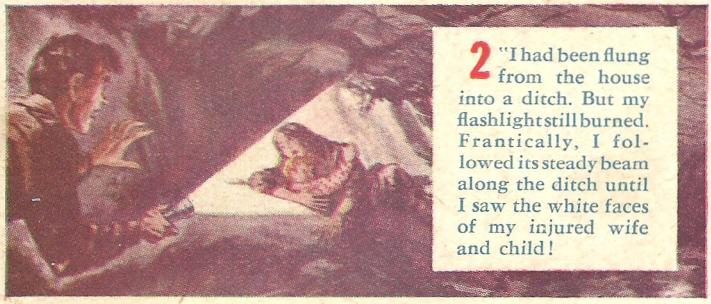


"We were caught in a wind that screamed our doom!"

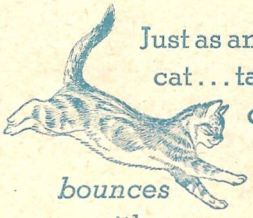
A TRUE EXPERIENCE OF JAMES F. BRADSHER IN AN ARKANSAS TORNADO

1 "Near midnight, we heard it! A sighing whisper . . . a whining gust of wind . . . a shrieking blast! The full fury of the tornado struck! My wife screamed! My child whimpered. I grabbed my flashlight. Suddenly . . . the whole house churned . . . spun in air.



2 "I had been flung from the house into a ditch. But my flashlight still burned. Frantically, I followed its steady beam along the ditch until I saw the white faces of my injured wife and child!

3 "With the help of our flashlight, we reached shelter. I thank those flashlight batteries for saving three lives that night. Now I know why 'Eveready' batteries are The Batteries With 'Nine Lives'!"



Just as an active cat . . . takes a cat nap . . . and *bounces back* with new pep . . . so "Eveready" flashlight batteries recover power * between uses and *bounce back* for *extra life!*

** Technical explanation:* due to the electrochemical regeneration of the depolarizer.

THE FLASHLIGHT BATTERY WITH "NINE LIVES"!

"Eveready," "Nine Lives" and the Cat Symbol are trade-marks of

NATIONAL CARBON COMPANY, INC.

30 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.

Unit of Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation

Write us about your true experiences with "Eveready" batteries. Address Dept. C.